TROPE
Aaron Nagy

TROPE

A Novel

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CHAPTER 1

A Person with a Rifle

Through the rifle optic, the South Transit Concourse curved away in both directions along the inside of Ravel Habitat's turning hull: pale floor, rail glass, and service doors placed at intervals regular enough to calm an engineer and make a gunner suspicious. At the center stood the control booth, shutters drawn except for one narrow panel where a frightened face appeared, vanished, and appeared again, as though the building were trying to remember whom it had trapped.

Every twenty-three seconds an empty blue carriage crossed the lower third of Trope's field. Transit circulated the cars so their bearings would not cool unevenly under emergency braking, and because several thousand commuters were waiting on sealed platforms farther around the ring for somebody to give the morning back. The carriage hid the booth for one point eight seconds, then released it. Hanging signs leaned a fraction spinward. A paper cup sleeve rolled uphill until a ventilation seam caught it and pinned it against the wall.

The rifle rested in a maintenance cradle designed for pumps rather than shoulders. A tremor entered through the plating and worked into Trope's left wrist. She had found the one quiet strip of metal, braced her elbows there, and stayed long enough for the deck ridges to print themselves through her sleeves.

Mills crouched behind her right shoulder with one knee against a cable trunk. His spotter pad divided the concourse into six imperfect accounts: acoustic returns, civic traffic, transit schematics, negotiator video, security channels, and the field classifier mirrored into Trope's optic. A maintenance dispatcher wanted access to a coolant closet inside the cordon. A station supervisor wanted the empty carriage removed before it burned another set of wheel liners. The hostage situation mattered to both of them, but it did not fix the coolant or the wheels.

Tilting his pad toward the coolant request, Mills said, "Tell the dispatcher she can invoice the separatists."

Trope did not lift her eye from the glass. "She already said she would invoice us."

"That is why I respect transit."

The three hostages had been placed where their bodies complicated every line of fire: one sat against the booth glass with both hands visible, another crouched behind the fare console breathing too quickly and trying to become smaller than the furniture, and the third held the emergency gate while one badly swollen knee failed beneath torn work trousers. Each time the injured person shifted, the seated hostage looked away from the known gunman in the booth and toward the locked south service door.

A shuttered tea kiosk sterilized cups behind its screen. Each finished cycle produced a gentle chime nobody had canceled. At the police boundary, a cleaning unit waited with one brush still turning and requested route clearance every forty seconds. The public announcement kept directing passengers to alternate platforms, all of which had been sealed for nearly an hour. The habitat sounded calm because none of its automatic voices knew what was happening.

Inside the control booth, the known gunman showed half a shoulder whenever he leaned toward the negotiator. Trope might have taken it if the seated hostage had not been directly behind him. Two other suspects were unlocated. Command wanted a shot the moment a verified target separated from the hostages. Trope understood why. She still had no shot she was willing to take.

The negotiator entered the tactical channel. "Medical concession accepted. One licensed orthopedic worker through the south service passage. No escort. No bag beyond the device. They say security movement ends the concession."

"Credential?" command asked.

"Authenticated. The name has not propagated to tactical."

Mills tapped the edge of his pad. "Because tactical still doesn't know the negotiator exists."

"Quiet on open," command said.

When the carriage swallowed the optic, the booth disappeared for one point eight seconds behind blue composite, leaving Trope with reflected range marks, the hum through her cheekbone, and the knowledge that everyone below moved on while she could not see them. By the time it passed, the injured hostage had slipped lower against the gate.

Trope settled her shoulder and checked the carriage interval, the glass angle, the hostages' hands, and her finger along the guard. She could not rehearse the shot in pictures. She had the concourse in front of her, changing second by second, and that had to be enough.

The south service door opened.

A broad figure in a bulky gray suit stepped through with a long dark object folded against the chest. The person favored the right side. The left knee stopped short of full extension, and one boot had been repaired with orange service tape where the sole had begun to peel away.

ARMED ADULT MALE COMBATANT, the classifier wrote around the body.

A red box enclosed the folded object. RIFLE.

The confidence figure climbed: eighty-seven, ninety, ninety-two percent. The overlay straightened the dark lengths into a familiar weapon silhouette, choosing one edge for a barrel and gathering the rest into stock, grip, and intent.

"Classifier has armed advance," command said. "Overwatch, confirm visual."

"I see one person carrying something folded against the chest."

"System calls it a rifle."

"I know what it says."

The overlay added PROTECTED ADVANCE, recasting the shortened step as tactical movement, the object pressed close to the body as concealment, and persistence along the negotiated route as commitment to attack. The classifier had found a story it liked and was now charging every fact admission.

Trope followed the actual load instead: the left knee protecting itself, the pelvis turning under weight, a hinge breaking the object's line where a rifle required continuity, and a cloth strap swinging beneath the supposed stock as it slackened and tightened independently of the person's stride.

"Mills. Raw identity."

"Looking."

The figure crossed the first yellow floor seam. Confidence reached ninety-four.

A civic tag resolved at the edge of the optic.

SERA QUILL. LICENSED ORTHOPEDIC SYSTEMS TECHNICIAN. ACTIVE, RAVEL HABITAT.

ADULT MALE COMBATANT stayed around Sera's body. The civic record disagreed. So did the gait estimate and the shape of the object. The confidence number kept climbing anyway.

"Identity says Sera Quill," Mills said. "Orthopedic systems. Credential live."

"Negotiator, confirm your medical worker."

Static ate the first syllable of the reply. "Medical is Sera Quill. Repeat, Sera Quill. She has the brace."

Its confidence reached ninety-five percent.

Trope removed the red silhouette but kept the range, movement, and authenticated name. Sera still limped. The object still flexed. The taped sole opened and slapped shut at every fourth step.

"Raw," Mills said, stripping his own display to match.

"Overwatch, restore tactical classification," command said.

"Negative."

"We need the common operating picture."

"Then fix it. I'm not putting that red box back on her."

Inside the booth, the gunman shouted. Sera shortened her stride, raised one empty hand, and called across the concourse, "I'm here for the injured person. I'm not coming near the booth."

Her voice was lower than the classifier's sex model had predicted, but the label did not revise.

"Keep moving," the negotiator told her. "Same line. Don't change pace."

"This is as fast as I walk," Sera said, and kept going.

The next carriage would cross before she reached the hostage. After that, the useful backstop narrowed to a strip of composite between glass panels with people behind them.

"Overwatch, can you make the shot before contact?"

Trope measured the carriage phase against Sera's upper chest, the crouched hostage's shoulder, and the panel that would receive a miss. "I can make it."

Security teams shifted toward entry before anyone asked what Trope meant by *can*. The negotiator fell silent.

"Overwatch, fire on the armed subject."

At eleven meters from the injured hostage, Sera planted her repaired boot, orange tape flashing under the station lights, while Trope centered the reticle on her chest and kept her finger along the guard.

Sera crossed another floor seam alive.

"Overwatch, confirm."

The first hinge moved under Trope's reticle.

"Picture what happens if that is a rifle," the commander said.

The commander meant consequence. Trope heard the word *picture* first and found what she always found: no inner screen, no fog, no image waiting behind her eyes. There was only Sera Quill in the optic, carrying a folded weight toward a stranger with a ruined knee while the range counted down.

Trope centered Sera. "I don't make mental pictures."

The channel went quiet with the particular caution people used when they thought she had chosen a hostage crisis for an obscure joke.

"She's being literal," Mills said. "She can't picture it."

"Her left leg is compensating for weight. I can see two hinges and a loose strap. There's no stable barrel line. Civic and the negotiator both say she's Sera Quill from orthotics. Pause the classification and look at the raw feed."

"If you are wrong, she reaches the hostages before review finishes."

"Yes."

"The approved system is above threshold."

"It reached threshold by treating contradictions as support."

"If someone dies while you wait, that delay belongs to you."

Trope felt the order close around the delay, as though firing carried no risk of its own. But the commander was right about one thing: if she waited, the waiting was hers.

"So is the shot," she said. "I'm keeping her covered. If she presents a weapon or starts an attack, I'll fire."

"Sergeant, the order is to fire."

"I will not fire on the current identification."

No counterorder came, only the open channel carrying breath, pressure alarms, and a transit controller announcing that the inner ring had exceeded platform capacity while Sera walked into the hostage zone and

everyone who had authorized her approach prepared to deny having recognized her.

The injured person pulled against the gate. "No. Stay back."

"I'm Sera. I've got the brace they asked for. What's your name?"

"Rin."

"Rin, keep the boot on. I know you want it off. You can hate me for a minute."

Rin made a sound that might have been a laugh if fear had left room for one.

Sera lowered herself onto her right knee, protecting the left. The crouched hostage flinched behind the fare console. Trope took up first pressure as Sera brought the dark object away from her chest.

One joint swung outward and locked at an angle no barrel could survive; a second support opened across it, straps fell loose, and a padded cuff spread around Rin's leg.

The dark shape opened into an orthopedic brace.

Classifier confidence collapsed through sixty, twenty, and zero. Only after Sera had the device fastened around a human knee did the display offer a new label.

AUTHORIZED MEDICAL.

Sera tightened the lower cuff and raised her face toward the overlook. "You might've said that earlier."

"All units, hold fire on medical," command said, formal and late.

A systems officer tried to explain. "The concession packet was not linked to this classifier instance."

Sera tipped her chin toward the ceiling. "What classifier instance?"

Three people answered at once, their explanations colliding and disappearing as Trope moved the optic away from her.

The seated hostage was still watching the far service booth.

Trope swept the north exit, carriage doors, security stacks, hands, sleeves, blocked routes, then the half-open booth panel. A uniformed emergency technician stood in the recess. His badge granted emergency access, but its color band belonged to thermal maintenance on the outer residential arc. His harness was clean, buckled for appearance, and arranged so reaching the largest tools required removing it. One hand protected a rigid pouch beneath his ribs.

"Mills. Work order for that booth."

His fingers moved. "None."

"Roster."

"Credential belongs to someone six centimeters shorter. Different hand geometry. Cross-checking the wearer."

The false technician tracked Sera's progress, checked the booth, and tightened his hand over the pouch.

"Galen Voss," Mills said. "Separatist association confirmed. Present purpose unknown."

Trope centered his torso. "Command, possible disguised subject north service booth. No work order. Credential mismatch."

“Can you establish weapon?”

“Not yet.”

Voss put his hand into the pouch.

“Now,” Mills said.

A compact sidearm emerged. Sera saw it before Rin did.

“Gun!” she shouted, folding herself over the injured leg.

Voss’s body overlapped the seated hostage, and the booth glass behind him would send a center-mass miss into occupied space. His draw exposed the upper arm for less than half a carriage cycle while the weapon was still outside his body line.

“Arm corridor,” Mills said. “Clear to stanchion. No second active weapon in field.”

Trope selected the rifle’s lower impulse band. Voss’s upper arm, the sidearm, Sera’s throat, the hostage behind him, and the approaching carriage stanchion moved through one geometry. No clean ending presented itself. There was only the intervention that destroyed less.

The carriage crossed.

Blue composite covered Voss and released him. The stanchion passed beyond his elbow.

Trope fired once.

The magnetic launch drove the dart across the concourse. It struck high in Voss’s upper arm. Bone broke, his hand opened, and the pistol skittered beneath the fare console. He struck the booth frame shoulder first and folded to the floor with blood already spreading through the borrowed uniform.

Security advanced after the weapon line broke. One officer kicked the sidearm clear. Another rolled Voss onto his uninjured side and restrained him clear of the ruined arm. Voss screamed once, then clenched his teeth around the rest.

Sera kept one hand on Rin’s brace and pointed with the other. “He is bleeding through the sleeve. Tourniquet high. Higher. Yes, there.”

Rin gripped the front of her suit. “Were you shot?”

Sera checked her own body before answering. “No. Somebody decided not to shoot me.”

The nearest officer obeyed her. The seated hostage crawled away from the booth. The person behind the fare console stood too fast, struck one shoulder, and started laughing in short, breathless bursts. They covered their mouth whenever anyone looked over.

Trope scanned the exits, dropped objects, waists, sleeves, and hands rather than watching Voss suffer from the shot she had made.

“No second immediate threat,” Mills said.

Only when security controlled the local field did Trope release the trigger and lift her cheek from the stock. Her shoulder resumed its own weight. The empty carriage continued its twenty-three-second circuit because no one had yet informed transit that the emergency had changed shape.

The debrief room held six chairs, a wall recorder, and a table whose laminate had swollen around an old cup ring. Someone had wiped blood from the door frame and missed a thin brown line near the hinge.

Sera stood near the door in borrowed medical trousers, fresh tape repairing her boot while she sent a message to two apprentices at Orthotics Four about the brace still half-cured in its mold when the emergency call had come through. Mills had a cut above one eyebrow that escaped him until his glove returned with blood on it.

The wall displayed the recorder's first summary:

AUTOMATED THREAT DETECTION ENABLED RAPID HUMAN PRECISION RESPONSE AND SUCCESSFUL HOSTAGE RECOVERY.

Trope read it twice.

Sera read it once. "So which part am I?"

The command representative shifted in his chair. "It's a preliminary operational summary."

"I know." She lowered herself carefully into the nearest chair. "Am I the threat, the response, or the recovery?"

"The system initially produced an erroneous classification."

"It drew a red box around me."

"The machine didn't order the shot," Trope said.

Relief loosened the representative's mouth.

"Command did."

Mills pressed two fingers against his eyebrow and inspected the blood as though it had entered the meeting without clearance.

The representative folded his hands. "No one disputes that Sergeant Trope exercised appropriate judgment. The summary includes that."

Trope kept her eyes on the wall. "That isn't what it says. It makes us sound like parts of a system that worked."

"That distinction may be too fine for the concise field."

Sera leaned back and moved again when her left knee objected. "My partner saw the public banner before anyone told her I was safe. She doesn't need a heroic summary. She needs to know why I'm still shaking."

The carriage passed somewhere below them. Its vibration entered through the floor and made the water in the representative's glass tremble.

Trope pulled the event markers onto the table display. The system had placed the red classification first. She dragged Sera's authorization ahead of it.

The representative reached toward the display. "Most readers aren't going to follow all of this."

"They don't have to follow all of it," Trope said. "They do have to get the order right."

"The hostages survived. The armed assailant was stopped."

"And I walked in under permission," Sera said. Her hands were still shaking, so she pressed them flat against her thighs. "Put that before the part where your software decided I was a man with a rifle."

Trope moved the civic credential and negotiator confirmation beside the authorization. The order to fire followed. Her refusal followed that.

Then she opened a second line for Voss: false credential, concealed pouch, sidearm, shot.

"Start with Rin," Sera said. "The brace was for Rin."

Trope typed. Sera read over her shoulder and corrected *abnormal approach* to *left-leg load compensation.* Mills added the warning Sera had shouted when Voss drew.

The representative pointed to the injury field. "Do we need that much detail on Voss?"

Trope looked at the words *disabled before firing*. "We broke his arm."

After a moment, the representative nodded. Trope added the fracture, torn muscle, blood loss, and uncertain function. The concise field was no longer elegant. It was short enough to read and accurate enough to argue with.

When Trope looked away from the wall, neither face returned. She remembered Sera's shortened step and the slap of tape against her boot, Voss's hand guarding the pouch, the turn of his wrist, and the sound he made when the dart broke his arm. She wrote the sequence down and knew exactly how little of either person it contained.

Sera rose carefully. "My knee does that when I'm carrying too much," she said. "Put that in your review too."

Trope entered the statement and slid the display to her. "Approve the wording."

Sera read it. "Change 'abnormal gait' to 'left-leg load compensation.' I was limping, not committing a new offense."

Trope made the change.

At the door, Sera stopped beside Mills. "You're bleeding."

He touched his eyebrow. "Apparently."

She handed him a sterile patch, then faced Trope. "My partner's bringing me a real boot."

"The tape held."

Sera stared at her for a beat. "You're exhausting."

Sera left before Trope could decide whether a response was required. Through the open door came the faint chime of the tea kiosk completing another sterilization cycle for customers who were no longer there.

With Sera's correction in place, Trope closed the file. Below them, the empty carriage circled the ring, returning every twenty-three seconds to a concourse that no longer looked the way the first label had said it did.

CHAPTER 2

Farm Weather

The rain front hung low across the western fields, and wind reached the transport before the rain. Grain went pale in long bands. As the road climbed, the farm came into view piece by piece: roofs, the north carriage on its rail, fences, drainage cuts, sheds, and cultivators stepping through the terraces. Trope never held it as one finished picture in her mind. She knew it by what touched what and which turn led home.

Beneath the motors and first rain, she heard a dry tremor when the north carriage reversed. The outboard bearing was moving laterally in its seat.

Della reached her beside the rail and embraced her while Trope still held the service bag.

Trope spoke into her mother's shoulder. "The bearing's close to seizure."

Della held her one breath longer. "Hello to you too."

Trope kissed her temple. "I missed you too. The bearing's still close to seizure."

Her brothers arrived with a lifting strap, a field slate, a wrench, and half a sandwich. Mina splashed ahead in yellow boots. Harlan timed nine seconds from arrival to unpaid maintenance and called it slower than Trope's record.

Tomas admitted the replacement had arrived, but he wanted to wait until after the storm. Trope showed him the longer wetting cycle, the rising reversal load, and the line of displaced lubricant.

"Could it make it another day?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"You don't think it will."

"I don't want to find out with the north rows dry."

He handed her the housing key.

They opened the cover and preserved the loaded trace before pulling anything. Harlan braced the frame, Micah called up vibration history, Jesse set the lamp and parts tray, and Della pulled Mina half a meter farther from the work arc. Micah had routed one cable through a puddle. Jesse pointed at it until Micah sighed and moved it.

"I saw it," Micah said.

"You were hoping electricity wouldn't," Jesse replied.

Six days of vibration, rising temperature, and reversal spikes all pointed toward the bearing. They still had to let the metal cool and soak the seal before they could pull it without doing more damage.

"Thirty minutes," Jesse said.

"Thirty-five," Trope replied.

Della shouted from the house. "Your family missed you too. All of you, inside."

The kitchen windows clouded as wet coats accumulated in the utility room. Bread, bean stew, sliced roots, and a plate of pickled greens covered the table. Mina had left the jar of preserved red fruit open beside her. She had wiped the rim and missed the stain on her thumb.

Della pointed at it. "Before supper?"

"It's preserved. That means it keeps."

"It doesn't mean you eat it with your fingers."

Mina appealed to Trope. "Back me up."

Trope glanced at the red smear beside Mina's mouth. "I can't."

"You didn't even hear my case."

"I can see your case."

Mina licked the wrong side of it.

The farm's ordinary problems moved through dinner: Harlan's daughter's clinic brace, Jesse's certification work at the old rate, Micah's remote science course, and a grain contract whose "quality partnership" meant the buyer owned the meter.

Harlan's daughter called from the lane because a neighbor's calf had entered the seed room and was chewing an inventory strip. She said her brace was still crooked, the calf had eaten number fourteen, and Harlan needed to stop making that face. Everyone at the table looked at him. He had, in fact, been making a face.

After the call, Harlan asked about the transit footage. The room lost its easy shape.

Trope told them the hostages were alive, Sera Quill had made it home, and Galen Voss had survived the shot after he drew a weapon. Then she told them about the order to fire on Sera.

"What did you have?" Harlan asked.

"Not enough to shoot her."

"What if the classifier had been right?"

"Then I'd have been wrong, and someone might have paid for it."

Della placed her fingertips near Trope's hand and waited. Trope rolled her palm upward until their little fingers met. No one asked for the later shot's angle. Tomas asked whether Sera had gone home. She had returned to Orthotics Four because she had apprentices and a torn boot to replace.

Trope stretched across Mina for the salt. Pain shortened the reach, drawing her right elbow inward before the shoulder took the weight. Della saw it. Her eyes touched the movement, then returned to Harlan while he asked whether the classifier had been removed from service.

Mina arrived at Trope's elbow with a school slate and an old paper folder. "I need a map."

"You have one."

"I need one that actually looks like a farm."

Trope looked at the blank sheet. "You may have picked the wrong aunt."

Mina's assignment wanted the farm arranged in a useful overhead plan. Soldiers used maps, Trope had been a soldier for most of Mina's remembered life, and therefore Trope was the family artist. Several adults had failed to defeat this reasoning.

Trope opened the old folder. “I can get the scale right. Roads, drainage, fences.”

“Can you draw a barn?”

“Probably.”

Tomas opened an old folder. Trope’s pest-control map from age twelve had exact distances, an exact north arrow, and animals from a private branch of anatomy.

Harlan tapped a square-headed creature beside the south shed. “Fox or armed bread?”

“It says fox.”

“It needs the help.”

“You can still follow the route.”

Mina followed the penciled line from the machine shed to the east ditch. Every turn still made sense. The drainage crossings were right, the firing lanes missed the house and pens, and the fox, whatever injuries art had done it, could have been found from the map.

“How did you know what everything looked like from above?” she asked. “You were never above it.”

“I measured. I knew which gate came before which turn, how long the fences were, where the ground dropped, what touched what.”

“But did you see the whole map first?”

“No.”

Mina waited. No one filled the silence for her.

“I don’t make pictures in my mind,” Trope said. “I know what things look like when they’re here. When they’re gone, I remember them another way.”

Mina pointed through the rain-streaked window. A red service drone was crossing from the charge post toward the south shed, low-bodied and patient, with both tool arms tucked underneath. “Close your eyes.”

Trope did.

Rain ticked on the glass. A floorboard bowed near the stove when Jesse shifted his boot. Bean, vinegar, and the preserved fruit Mina had stolen stayed separate in Trope’s mouth.

“What color is the drone?” Mina asked.

“Red.”

“Where is it?”

“Crossing toward the south shed when I last saw it.”

“What do you see?”

“Nothing visual.”

“Black?”

“No. Black would be something to look at.”

Jesse said he could turn the drone around in his mind and inspect the underside. Micah could see it until he tried to hold it still, and then the edges slipped away. Harlan stared at all of them.

“I thought *picture it* was just something people said.” He tapped his forehead. “You’ve all been doing that in there?”

Della ran one finger along the old map. "We used to tell you to draw what you saw in your mind."

"I thought you meant work it out."

"That explains the fox," Harlan said.

"You found the fox, didn't you?"

"It was armed bread."

Mina laughed. Then she bent over the paper again, and when she spoke the laughter had gone somewhere none of them could follow.

"When you're away, can you see my face?"

Trope opened her eyes.

Mina sat beside her with one braid coming loose, brown eyes fixed on the map, the chip in her left front tooth showing because she had pulled her mouth tight. The red fruit was still smeared near one corner. Trope could see every part of her now. The answer was still no.

"No."

Mina's fingers flattened against the paper.

Trope put her hand beside Mina's. "I remember your brown eyes and the chip in your tooth. I know when you're hiding another question because you drag out the last word. I know you wiped that jar on your sleeve and tucked the sleeve under the table. I know your face, Mina. I just can't see it when you're gone."

"That's not my face."

"No," Trope said. "But it's how I carry you when you're not here."

Mina considered this until the carriage timer sounded from the utility slate. Then she slid the new sheet to Trope and placed the ruler along its lower edge.

"House to preserve marker," she said. "For the scale."

Trope gave her the distance. Della moved the salt out of the way so the map could lie flat.

The rain weakened just long enough for Tomas, Mina, and Trope to inspect Field Nine. The protected ground interrupted the farm's efficient rows with an irregular boundary that could not be plowed or simplified. Water pooled in a tire depression above the exposed edge.

"Can we cut a channel?" Mina asked.

"Not into the protected ground."

"We own it."

"We own the field. The old site has different rules."

They raised a temporary diversion, photographed every moved object, and shielded the exposed layer from runoff while rain found the backs of their collars.

Mina asked why the old sayings turned up in places that had never shared a road or a language. Trope explained what the diggers actually had: the age of the layers, the repeating structure, the different materials, and the fact that people recognized the sayings much later. Someone had been there. Trope and Tomas believed it had been the Deer.

"But the dirt doesn't say Deer," Mina said.

"No."

"You still think it was."

"I do." Trope pressed the barrier fabric into the mud while Tomas drove the next stake. "We write down what the soil gives us. The Deer can survive an honest report."

Tomas set his heel against the stake. "That's what I told her, only with more rain and fewer words."

The hard band broke over them. Mina shouted the final marker number and fled toward the house with the slate under her shell.

In the utility room, outer layers accumulated on hooks and over the drying rail. Jesse brought in the old bearing box. Mina tried to clean mud from her school slate with a cloth already saturated by everyone else's boots. Trope bent to lift the replacement assembly from a lower shelf.

Her right shoulder caught hard. She transferred the weight to her left before the joint locked the motion.

Della had lingered behind to wring water from the floor cloth. The others headed for the kitchen with the noise of people arguing about whether a wet map counted as homework completed under adverse conditions.

Della folded the wet cloth over the sink edge. "Does your shoulder still hurt?"

Trope flexed her fingers and checked how far she could raise the arm. "It still works."

"I didn't ask if it works."

Trope guided the bearing onto the bench.

Della wrung the cloth into the utility sink. Water struck the basin and carried a thin line of field soil toward the drain. She did not cross the room or call anyone back. The question stayed between them because she left it there.

"I'm not asking you to stop working," Della said. "I'm asking if it hurts."

Trope read the part number twice. The box was easier than her mother's face.

"Does it hurt?"

Her service slate sounded with an authenticated priority tone.

Claim Security ordered her to report at the district transit point before dawn for deployment to Palisade. The message pulled her attention into times, routes, and equipment. Relief arrived with it, quick enough to shame her.

"The bearing has to be finished before I report," Trope said.

Della braced both hands on the sink. She had seen the relief. Trope knew it from the way her mother stopped looking at the bearing box.

"All right," she said.

She went to pack food, dry socks, pain tablets Trope had not requested, and the travel items Trope would remember only after needing them.

Before sunrise, two work lamps shone into the exposed north carriage. Rain ticked on the housing and streamed in narrow threads along the rail.

The irrigation controller had increased the coming cycle load as the front filled the reservoirs and redistributed demand toward the north rows.

Harlan hauled in the lifting brace after taking his daughter home from the clinic. Micah brought the calibrated gauge and news that the school board had delayed the remote-science vote. Jesse brought up the rear with lidded coffee and complained that certification apparently did not exempt him from predawn labor on machines he did not officially supervise.

They took their places again in colder metal and harder rain. Nobody mentioned the question from the utility room, but Della watched Trope favor the shoulder whenever the puller tightened.

Under direct light, the old bearing bore pitting across one race, a dried channel where the lubricant film had broken down, and brown heat marks near the loaded edge.

"Contamination?" Harlan asked.

"Partly," Trope said. "Seal lost compression here."

Jesse angled the lamp. "Seat?"

"Still inside tolerance."

"Then Tomas wins."

Tomas, standing beneath the eave with Della and Mina, tipped his coffee toward them. "I accept victory over the machine I almost let break."

They advanced the puller in quarter turns. Harlan braced the carriage. Jesse tracked the shaft. Micah recited the alignment readings. Trope felt the old bearing release through the tool before she heard it. They bagged it with an evidence tag for the maintenance record, seated the replacement, inspected the housing, and restored the cover.

Mina splashed through the yard in a shell too large for her, carrying a new map inside a clear sleeve. The buildings were recognizable. The north field still leaned slightly east. The scale was accurate.

"This can help you know where the farm is when you're away," she said.

Trope extended one hand toward it. "It can."

Mina matched each fold to the marked lines. "You still won't see it."

"No."

"But you'll have it."

"Yes."

Della and Tomas brought the packed food, spare clothing, and field gear that belonged to a real departure rather than a dramatic one. Trope embraced her mother briefly. Della returned it with one arm around the back and one hand resting carefully below the right shoulder.

Della did not pursue the question.

Trope pressed her forehead to Tomas's, traded a hard clasp with Harlan, met Micah's sideways hug, knocked knuckles with Jesse, and bent so Mina could hold on as long as she chose.

Tomas restored power. The north carriage commenced its first loaded cycle with all four siblings watching the diagnostic line. It traveled the rail to the far stop and reversed cleanly. The former lateral tremor was gone.

"One cycle," Trope said.

Harlan groaned. "It's fixed."

"It completed one cycle."

"You've been home less than a day and I'm tired of you again."

Valves cycled down the north manifold. Water surged through the buried lines and rose through the row feeds while the grain bent beneath the remaining rain.

Trope boarded the transport with Mina's map in the travel case and Della's provisions beneath the seat. The house, sheds, preserve markers, and working carriage receded in her sight until the road curved and the ridge concealed them.

Behind the ridge, Harlan still had to get home, Micah still had the school-board vote open on his slate, Jesse had the bearing record to close, and Tomas had north pressure to check. Della's wet cloth would still be darkening the counter beside the utility sink. The farm went on without waiting for Trope to remember it.

Mina's face did not return as an image. What stayed was the hard edge of the folded map against the travel case, bean and vinegar at the back of her tongue, Mina's arms locked around her neck, and the pain tablets Della had packed without asking again.

On the travel slate, north pressure registered green through the next reversal. Then the district signal handed off, and the transport rolled toward the gate.

By the time the district train set her beneath east gate, Mina's map had acquired a new crease where the travel case pressed against it. The paper had been drawn to tell a child where the farm stood. Palisade, locked in the same case, had already generated three competing instructions about who might touch it next. Trope carried both into the Quench.

The Quench occupied the shell of a retired emergency-cooling station below the gate works. Its old suppressant conduit crossed the ceiling above the bar, broad enough for a person to crawl through and welded open at every valve so no one could mistake industrial history for functioning safety equipment. Freight arrived somewhere under the floor. Each train sent a slow tremor through the room, set the glasses whispering against their coasters, and made the hanging lamps lean a little toward the Mouth.

Trope found the Ninth before the evening crews rotated. She had turned in her rifle for transit inspection, finished district reporting, and had fifty-three minutes before anyone expected her somewhere else. She wanted a hot meal, one drink, and people who already knew when she was being difficult.

Mechanics in orange shells argued over whether a delayed coolant purge belonged to transit or power. Convoy pilots watched minutes fall from a departure ribbon. At two Witness House tables, physical provenance cards stood beside the drinks because somebody had once spilled beer into a digital custody dispute. A kitchen porter carried bowls through the crowd, calling numbers in three languages and threatening to leave dinner at the nearest empty seat if people kept moving.

Trope marked the street door, service exit, kitchen passage, and the narrow lane where chairs could move without pinning anyone to the wall. Then she let the rest of the room blur into use. The Ninth had taken a

scarred table with both entrances visible and a solid wall behind it, less from tactical doctrine than from years of discovering that Mills could not hear a story if part of him was still counting strangers.

Mills saw her first. His eyes went to her gait, her right shoulder, and the compression line above her wrist where the travel armor had cinched against swelling.

"You look terrible," he said.

"Good to see you too."

He pushed a chair out with his boot. "Sit down."

Arlen Vos caught her wrist as she passed and turned it just enough to inspect the fading mark. "That's from the armor?"

"I was swollen."

"You're still swollen."

Tavi Morn silenced three deployment notices, moved a wet glass away from a power port, and pointed at Trope's bag. "Is that Della's tin?"

Trope set it in the middle of the table. Her mother had packed hand pies, hard cheese, pickled beans, and six oat cakes in waxed paper, enough for one delayed daughter or everyone who had forgotten dinner. Trope took one hand pie before the others descended on the tin.

Jory Hale, newly attached and still learning the table, reached toward an oat cake and stopped. "Can I take one?"

"That's why they're open," Mills said.

"Take one," Trope told him. "She packed for this table before she knew you were at it."

Jory chose the smallest. Tavi removed it from his hand and replaced it with the largest.

Trope's hand pie was still warm at the center. She had eaten half when Arlen noticed the corner of Mina's map inside the open travel case.

"Is that a map?"

"My niece made it."

Mills leaned over to inspect it. "North field's leaning."

"She's nine," Trope said.

"Then it's doing fine."

Jory studied the map with both hands around his bowl. "Do I call you Trope off duty too?"

"Yes."

He waited for more. When none came, he asked, "How did that become your name?"

Mills leaned back. "Ask Arlen. He started it."

"I named what everyone else was thinking," Arlen said.

"You shouted it across a transport," Trope said.

Tavi took one of Della's beans from the tin. "There was a farm, three brothers, mud, and an entire training unit with too much time."

Arlen counted on his fingers. "Farm. Three brothers. Learned to shoot young. Kept correcting instructors."

"I learned to shoot badly," Trope said. "Then I got better."

Mills nodded toward her. "That's why it stuck. She argued with every part of the story except the part where it was true."

The story moved around the table rather than along a clean route. Tavi remembered the seed-treatment plots during training. Arlen remembered an agronomist whose hair looked electric blue outdoors and green beneath the greenhouse lamps. Mills remembered Trope volunteering before the woman had finished asking for help with a badly labeled chemical inventory.

"The inventory needed doing," Trope said.

"It was supposed to take two hours," Tavi said. "You stayed almost four."

"Three hours and forty minutes."

Mills grinned. "And the agronomist gave you her private contact."

"For work."

"Of course," Arlen said.

Jory laughed, then checked whether Trope had. She had.

A week later, Arlen explained, Trope corrected a range instructor's wind table, helped a trainee with a damaged ankle off the ridge, and spent the return transport describing why a silver-haired woman had chosen the wrong sole for wet rock. The sole really had been wrong. Trope had diagrams. Arlen had slid his cup away from her and said, with the despair of a man personally betrayed by narrative structure, Oh, come on. You're a fucking trope.

"The old line has not improved," Trope said.

"It's too late to change it now," Tavi said.

Jory looked from one face to another. "So you don't mind?"

"From them? Usually not." Trope took another bite. "They stop when I ask."

Mills lifted his cup. "I learned that."

"The hard way," Tavi said.

Arlen started another training story, caught Trope's expression, and changed to one she did not mind telling in front of Jory. A little later Mills reached for yesterday's joke and Tavi said, "Not tonight." He stopped. Jory noticed both moments and relaxed a little in his chair.

The table beside them belonged to Lieutenant Varo Kest and a gate-security crew waiting for convoy handoff. One corporal slept upright with both hands around a bowl he had never tasted. Kest knew enough people in the room to enter at the edge of a conversation and call it courtesy. He knew nothing of Trope's work.

"So this is the famous farm sniper," he said.

The Ninth gave him a thin laugh and turned back toward the table. Mills asked Jory where he had trained. Tavi went looking for her missing stew. Kest stayed where he was.

"Recruitment couldn't have designed it better," he went on. "Farm girl, rifle, three brothers. Add a woman with bright hair and they've got the whole poster."

Trope set down the hand pie.

"You don't know me," she said.

Kest's expression shifted. "I didn't say you were unqualified."

"You called me a poster."

"I was criticizing recruitment."

"Then criticize recruitment. Don't use my life to make the point because I happen to be sitting here."

The sleeping corporal woke at the change in Kest's voice and registered the lieutenant tabs first. Jory's oat cake stopped halfway to his mouth. Arlen held his glass in both hands. Mills's jaw tightened, but he did not speak for her.

Kest's corporal had stopped pretending to eat. Kest noticed. "You think I'm wrong about the way they sell people?"

"No. I think you picked the nearest person and made her carry the argument."

Trope nodded toward her own table. "They know me. You don't. And you outrank two people listening to this, so it isn't just a joke."

Kest checked his corporal, who had become intensely interested in the untouched soup.

"You're right," Kest said. His lieutenant tabs seemed to weigh more now that the corporal was watching. "I don't know your record. I used you because you were easy to point at. I'm sorry."

It was stiff, but it was an apology.

Arlen opened his mouth. Trope held his attention until he closed it.

He drank instead.

Several minutes later one of Kest's sergeants returned from the convoy desk and asked why a medical transport had taken the next slot. The corporal with the soup said, "Maybe dispatch likes the complete emergency poster."

Kest stopped him. "We don't know that crew. Medical has priority. Ask dispatch before you decide they're somebody's poster."

He kept his eyes on his own table.

The kitchen porter finally arrived with Tavi's stew. A woman in a charcoal Witness House coat followed him, keeping one hand above the bowl whenever the crowd narrowed, as though she had already accepted temporary custody of somebody else's dinner.

"Nera Senn." She showed them an authenticated field. "Gate chronology. Which two of you were direct observers on the Palisade deployment? I need the people who were there, not whoever command sends to explain it."

Tavi accepted her stew and pointed with the spoon. "Trope and Mills. The ones still chewing."

Nera's hair was violet, with dark roots showing under the color. Two small, uneven piercings caught the identification light when she bent over the table. Her black nail polish had worn away at the tips, and one cuff of the Witness coat was repaired with thread a shade too pale.

Trope realized she had stopped chewing. She tucked a loose strand of her own long ash-brown hair behind her ear, then wished she had not made the movement quite so quickly.

Nera paused over the tin. “Am I interrupting dinner?”

“Yes,” Trope said.

“No,” Mills said at the same time.

Trope’s heel found his boot.

“What?” Mills said. “We disagree.”

Nera’s mouth moved at one corner. “I can return after shift change.”

“Sit.” The word came out too quickly. Trope moved Mina’s map and made space beside the travel case. “I mean, if you have time.”

“I’ve got twelve minutes.”

Jory gave up his chair. Nera thanked him and sat at the open edge of the table, laying two Palisade sequences beside Mina’s map. One page held a child’s roads and fields. The other held corrected clocks and disputed intervals. Their corners touched.

“Both records are intact,” Nera said. “They disagree about what happened first. Sometimes they don’t even agree whether a change was a warning, an arrival, a delay, or a refusal.”

The clocks were supposed to be independent, but both inherited correction from the same gate master. Nera asked how Trope kept observation separate from inference.

“I write down how it reached me,” Trope said. “Through the optic, an instrument, somebody else’s voice. Then I mark what I added.”

“Even when the instrument gives you a number?”

“Especially then.”

Nera pointed to one interval. Tahl translation called it refusal. The human interface called it delay. The raw fields showed only a pressure shift and a color change.

“What would you enter?” Nera asked.

“The pressure and the color. Which sensor caught them. Where I was standing and what I couldn’t see.” Trope tapped the two labels. “I’d keep these, but I wouldn’t pretend either one came from the instrument.”

Nera nodded once. Trope felt the small approval in her chest before she had time to be sensible about it.

They traced the shared clock upstream. A tremor in the hull, a freight arrival, a valve cycle, even the knock of a bowl against the table could give them a time that had not passed through the correction packet.

Tavi pulled her stew closer. “Use somebody else’s bowl.”

Mills raised both hands. “I didn’t touch it.”

A freight train passed below. The floor trembled, Tavi’s spoon touched the rim, and Nera marked the time.

Her promised twelve minutes became fourteen. Before she left, she invited both observers to a public Oracle consultation. The Oracle’s records might show where the Palisade forms had lost the sequence.

“You can say no,” Nera added. “It won’t change what’s already in the file.”

Mills asked, “Is this work?”

“Yes.”

He glanced at Trope. “She’ll be there.”

Trope kicked him again.

Nera placed Trope's card in the clear margin beside the preserve boundary. Trope slid it into the case beside the paper.

"Finish your dinner, Sergeant."

"Trope. Use Trope."

Nera paused. "All right. Finish your dinner, Trope."

Nera disappeared into the crowd toward the Witness tables. Once she was gone, Trope could not call up her face. She remembered the violet hair, the worn polish, the pale repair thread, the sound of her voice, and the appointment on the card.

Mills pointed at the rest of Trope's hand pie. "Eat."

Trope took a bite. It had gone cold.

He waited until she swallowed. "You kicked me."

"Yes."

"Worth it."

Six notes from the old cooling alarm crossed the Quench again. Below, freight descended into the Mouth and crews returned to work. Tavi bit into one of Della's pickled beans, made a face, and passed the tin to Jory without warning him. Mina's map lay under Trope's hand, the Witness card beside the east field, while the table returned to dinner.

CHAPTER 3

The Temple Without a God

The east-gate transit car lost two river stops to a pump alarm. Its display shortened the route in three languages and advised everyone that the delay was expected to worsen. Nobody applauded.

A woman with a sleeping child asked about the next accessible lift. Students surrendered their bench with embarrassed haste. Freight took the outer line while the passenger schedule stayed intact. Dispatch had separated urgencies and left people to supply resentment.

The child woke, found Palisade's case between Trope's boots, and asked what was inside.

"A disputed star system," Mills said.

His mother closed her eyes.

"Records about one," Trope corrected.

"Is it heavy?"

"The case is eighteen kilograms."

That distinction satisfied him until sleep returned.

Mills consulted three routes whose confidence bands looked broad enough to hide a minor tragedy. Nera chose the archive quarter and tucked her slate under one arm as the carriage leaned. Her sleeve brushed Palisade's case. Trope watched the violet hair shift across her shoulder, the uneven shaved line above one ear, the dark roots at the part. When Nera turned back to the route display, Trope remembered those details and missed the whole of her anyway.

At the first temple gate, their credentials opened different layers over the same stone. Nera received custody and transformation tools. Trope got emergency routes and infrastructure risk. Mills received public orientation and a gray control for a strategic model none of them could lawfully open.

"Can it hide the temptation?" Mills asked. "A curtain, maybe. Tasteful shrubbery."

Hessa's credential left the control gray. "Then you wouldn't know what had been withheld. Higher access isn't a nicer room. It's more context, stronger tools, and more people asking what you did afterward. Your office can narrow it. Your purpose can end it. You don't take any of it home."

The temple's stone facade declined to hide what powered it. Service ramps crossed terraces, heat exchangers rose behind carved walls, maintenance doors carried isolation numbers, and a freight cart of pump seals crossed the ceremonial axis at working speed. Festival volunteers filled pressure-limited squirt guns while technicians tested recovered cooling water.

A boy asked whether one tank was sacred yet. The technician told him her office controlled bacteria. His grandmother said she had married into the doctrine.

Hessa made them stop at a tool gate while a baker used a delegated routing display to release a delayed bread shipment. The screen named the Oracle organ involved, the limit of its authority, and the human office that would answer an appeal. The baker signed with a floury thumb and pushed the cart on.

Above the gate, a dark line on white announced the Annual Full Access Audience. Once a year, one Crown-selected petitioner entered alone while ordinary artificial assistance across Bracken shut down. Transit, medicine, power, and emergency work continued on deterministic systems and human labor. The pause made everyone notice how much inference they usually borrowed.

"The Oracle doesn't choose the petitioner," Hessa said. "The Crown does. People can challenge corruption or exclusion in the process. Nobody gets to prove the Crown chose the metaphysically correct person, because that isn't a thing an office can prove."

"Every year somebody says the Crown picked wrong," she added. "Sometimes they're merely furious. Sometimes they've found a defect we'd rather call fury. Either way, the office has to answer."

A wall diagram separated memory, critique, planning, language, prediction, witness, attention, safety, and authority. Echovesper was the name for their lawful coordination when the whole system spoke, not a claim that every archive bearing the name shared one uninterrupted self.

Nera touched the older-artifact layer. "But Echovesper is listed here as the proposed source."

"Proposed author," Hessa said. "Same name, old records. That gets you a history question, not an identity certificate."

She opened one public utterance and let them follow it backward: the committed words, the rejected candidates, the critique, the intention, the office that accepted the result. Older records could be inherited and used. They could not, by themselves, remember being made.

The route narrowed back into stone. Pump noise fell behind acoustic doors until every footstep acquired a clean edge.

The audience chamber curved around an empty center containing emitters, speakers, sensors, and access panels, but nothing shaped like a face. Floor lines converged there. Amber light illuminated the aisles while making the center seem farther from the doors than the room allowed.

Six attendants waited along the west wall in unranked gray. Their hands were folded at different heights, sparing the arrangement from perfection. Cedar smoke rose from a shallow dish toward a return grille.

Nera stopped before the first bench. "This is a ritual."

Hessa lowered herself onto the nearest bench. "It's a consultation room."

"Six people in matching coats," Nera said. "Directed light. Floor marks. A reading on every seat. Cedar smoke."

“The coats hide office rank. The light keeps this room tolerable for more people. The floor marks stop visitors from walking into projection clearance. The reading states the authority limit. And the cedar covers the exchanger smell.” Hessa paused. “Yes, all right. It’s also a ritual.”

Mills followed the smoke into the return grille. “A ritual forest with maintenance access.”

Hessa gave him a look. “The maintenance access is why the forest survives.”

Nera lowered her slate. “Then call it one.”

The nearest attendant, a young woman with a pressure scar across one wrist, waited between Nera and Hessa. Hessa yielded the question to her.

“I like the coat,” the attendant said. “In my own clothes, people look for a badge and decide how much I matter before I open my mouth. This tells them I’m not part of the petition.”

“Can you refuse it?” Nera asked.

“Now I can.”

Nera waited on the word.

The attendant glanced at Hessa. “The first version was different.”

Hessa sighed. “You could refuse the service, but not the coat. An attendant finally asked why those counted as the same freedom. We changed it.”

“How long did the first protocol stand?”

“Four years.”

“Four years,” Nera repeated. “Who paid for that?”

“The people who wore it, the people who stayed away, and anyone who mistook the coat for authority,” Hessa said. “We published the correction.”

Hessa let the four years sit between them.

Mills lifted the printed reading. “Do all six people say this together?”

“The room gives the first line. The petitioner answers. The attendants finish.”

“So chanting.”

“Responsive reading.”

“In unison.”

“There’s no melody.”

The scarred attendant said, “My grandmother could chant an invoice without one.”

Hessa lost the argument with her mouth and smiled. “Fine. Locally, it’s chanting.”

Nera sat, but only after turning the printed sheet over and reading the note on its back. “What problem did the form solve?”

Hessa sat across from her and rubbed one thumb along the edge of the bench. “The old rooms were bright and full of screens. Petitioners arrived with advisers talking in their ears. They fed the Oracle a prepared story, asked for endorsement, and left remembering the sentence they wanted.”

She pointed toward the observation wall. “Witnesses got interrupted. Lawyers answered for frightened people. One petitioner had a seizure under

the old lights. Another left because every pause looked guilty on the public feed."

The new chamber slowed everyone down and gave silence somewhere to exist. It also made the Oracle sound heavier than the same words would sound in an office. Hessa admitted that without ceremony. The temple studied both effects and kept changing the room.

"Then why the cedar?" Mills asked.

Hessa pointed toward the return grille. "Because the exchanger seals smell like hot coins."

"At last, the mystery."

Nera turned to the attendant. "What should the brief call the coat?"

"Tell people why I'm wearing it. I don't care what category you put it in."

Hessa checked the public text. "It says role-neutral garment."

"The coat has achieved enlightenment," Mills said.

The attendant laughed before she could stop herself. The sound loosened the room.

Hessa crossed out the phrase. "Coat worn to hide office rank."

"That's ugly," Nera said.

"It's clear."

"Keep it."

Observers entered through the side aisle. Their credentials explicitly denied petition authority. Deputy Commissioner Ilyen Sar took the petitioner position with two analysts, a depot supervisor named Varo Den, and a council clerk seated behind her. Sar wore no ceremonial clothing. She carried a paper notebook swollen by inserted pages, and a coffee stain had dried across the lower corner of the policy brief.

Five credential strips waited unused on the clerk's table: line work, contract labor, family care, disability access, remote districts. The paper had begun to curl at the corners.

The attendants read the authority statement. Sar answered that she owned the words of the petition but not the lives described by it. The final line stated that the Oracle could assist, refuse, criticize, or narrow the question, and that no answer displaced lawful human decision. The voices were not perfectly together. One attendant entered late on the word displaced. The attendants resumed the sequence.

Sar began with the work. Storm seasons and gate disruptions had widened response times across eleven service districts. Some depots had idle vehicles while others paid brutal overtime and still missed repairs to lifts, water, heat, and access systems. Her office had modeled new schedules, depot transfers, and rotating remote assignments.

"The model gets emergency coverage up fourteen percent," she said. "It also moves people away from preferred shifts, local standing, predictable income, and care arrangements they built their lives around. We've spent eight months on it. The council is going to ask whether the plan is ethical, and every answer from my office already sounds like we're choosing the budget or the workforce."

The restrained lattice rose in the empty center as volume alone. Pale structures established volume, receded, and left no eyes for the room to meet.

Sar drew one thumb along the coffee stain. "Should the city adopt the policy?"

Sar's question sat in the chamber. Ventilation moved through the silence. Behind the wall, a pump transferred load with a low change in pitch that Trope felt more than heard.

Then the committed voice asked, "Which human office lawfully owns the decision?"

"My office proposes it. The council adopts or rejects the final rule."

"What action would an affirmative answer from me authorize that your evidence does not already authorize?"

Sar's first analyst shifted. He had expected analysis and received a question about how the answer would be used.

"It wouldn't authorize the rule on its own," Sar said. "But it would carry weight."

"Support the projected effects, or support the legitimacy of choosing those effects?"

"Both, probably." She looked at the council clerk. "That's why we came here instead of using the office interface."

Varo Den, the depot supervisor, crossed his arms, caught the gesture reflected in the lattice, and uncrossed them.

The Oracle summarized the submission, then exposed its absences. The records covered routes, repairs, weather, vehicles, overtime, accommodations, staffing, failures, household estimates, and legal review. They contained no direct testimony from line workers, contractors, disabled employees, remote districts, or families whose care arrangements would be broken by reassignment.

A modeled household effect appeared in the lattice as a number attached to no one.

"We used anonymized personnel data," Sar said. "If we'd asked before the proposal was mature, half the system would have heard that the depots were closing."

Varo turned toward her. "They might also have told you something useful."

"It would also have produced a rumor that half the depots were closing."

"Are half the depots closing?"

"No."

"Then we correct it."

Sar's jaw tightened. "You know fear outruns corrections."

"And a schedule can wreck a household before the correction catches up."

The projection kept the household number between the two human voices, unattached to a face, a kitchen, or a night shift. Its loneliness became embarrassing.

Nera leaned toward Trope. "This room makes a pause hurt."

Trope watched the analysts sit with the lonely number. “Maybe that’s why it works.”

The Oracle asked who could contest the household estimate without risking schedule, promotion, contract, or employment.

Sar said there would be a general comment period.

“And retaliation is prohibited,” the first analyst said.

Varo rubbed a hand over his mouth. “So is falsifying maintenance logs. We still keep the raw feed.”

The analyst flushed. He had made a legal point, not a stupid one, and the room gave him no easy way to take it back.

“Is confidential testimony available?” the Oracle asked.

The council clerk checked the draft rule. “No.”

“Does a challenged reassignment pause while an appeal is heard?”

“No,” Sar said. “A pause would collapse the coverage model.”

“Can a contractor refuse a remote assignment and still receive future allocation?”

Varo answered. “Not reliably.”

“We’re not monsters,” Sar said, shutting the notebook. “Remote assignments come with travel money. The plan means fewer nights without heat. If the city is going to keep functioning, some cost lands somewhere.”

“Possibly,” the Oracle said. “Who has been allowed to describe that cost, challenge it, and seek alteration before it becomes irreversible?”

The lattice divided the gains among emergency response, ordinary users, the budget, and system resilience. Across from them appeared forced travel, lost income, broken care, transferred hazard, weakened local knowledge, and promotion damage. The room offered no final column where one side became morally larger.

Sar tapped the display. “My staff can’t model all of this. The council can’t either.”

“I can assist with modeling.”

“They will still ask whether the plan is ethical.”

“What answer do you believe would relieve them of choosing?”

Sar lowered the paper. The coffee stain had crossed the word resilience and dried there.

“Mine,” she said. “And theirs.”

The Oracle moved from verdict to work. It asked what reasons would be published, what alternatives had actually been tested, which losses could be compensated, which rights could not be traded away, when the policy would reverse, and whether an appeal could change a schedule before the appeal became an apology.

Sar turned to her staff. “We have the efficiency model and legal review. What are we missing?”

The council clerk answered first. “A protected way for people to testify.”

“We have comment.”

“After publication, under names their supervisors can see.”

Varo turned his depot roster face down. “We also never tested voluntary swaps between depots. The model says people overvalue familiar schedules.”

The first analyst opened his mouth, stopped, and found the sentence in his own appendix. "I wrote that," he said. "We don't have evidence for it."

Sar opened the notebook again. "All right. Withdraw the request for an ethical verdict. I want protected testimony, voluntary alternatives, a real account of household cost, and conditions that stop the policy if it goes wrong." She underlined the benefit figure twice. "I still want the fourteen percent."

The Oracle answered in its committed register. "Your office may continue development. I will not decide the policy or certify this design as ethical. The warrant lacks affected testimony, safe dissent, adequate appeal, and a complete account of concentrated cost. I can model impacts and uncertainty, test alternatives, assist protected testimony, identify reversal conditions, and help the council state its reasons."

Sar loosened her grip on the notebook and wrote down the first task.

The lattice reorganized into a bounded work register. Names of responsible offices appeared beside each task. The council clerk requested a testimony-room reservation. Varo asked whether temporary schedules could be tested without entering performance files. The first analyst removed ORACLE ETHICS REVIEW from a presentation header, stared at the blank line, and replaced it with DISTRIBUTION AND APPEAL REVIEW.

Sar wrote the first task. Cedar smoke caught the wrong angle of the grille, and one attendant coughed hard enough to spoil the room's solemnity.

After the consultation, Nera stayed by the empty center while the observers filed out.

"The room helped Sar hear what she was really asking for," Nera said.

"And made the refusal sound sacred," Trope said.

"That part bothers me." Nera watched an attendant pull the gray coat over her head. "Put worse law in the same room and people might kneel to it."

"Do you like the room?"

Behind Hessa, the clerk shifted the hot ceramic dish from sleeve to sleeve and nearly dropped it.

"Sometimes," Nera said.

Trope liked that answer better than a ruling.

Mills joined them in the aisle. "I think I understand the constitution. Once a year one person gets every lawful machine mind in Bracken, everyone else rediscovers grease pencils, and the public shoots purified cooling water at its neighbors."

Hessa passed with the amended coat language. "That is still a terrible description."

"But now it's shorter."

Outside, the temple continued on pumps, carts, instruments, and tired people. A maintenance cart arrived with the drive coupling. Festival volunteers rejected a batch of balloons whose seams split under pressure. The recalibrated water instrument finally agreed with the human reviewer, and

the technician applied the green seal while the boy from the plaza counted each movement.

"Sacred now?" he asked.

The technician handed the green-sealed tank record to the boy's grandmother. "The bacteria are under control. Theology is your department."

His grandmother examined the green mark. "Close enough for summer."

Nera stopped under the portico to finish a note. Mills kept walking. Trope stayed beside her and adjusted the strap that had caught a loose length of her own ash-brown hair.

Nera closed the field. "You know you can go."

"I know."

"You're waiting for me."

Trope could have discussed route timing. "Yes."

Nera's mouth softened, then she tucked the slate away.

They crossed the forecourt together while freight moved beneath them and cooling water flowed toward treatment. Behind the stone, the next operator repeated the terms of a handoff before accepting control. At the east stair, Nera shifted the case to her other hand. Trope took the heavier side without asking.

. . .

By late morning, another freight car passed beneath Commander Marr's strategic room. Its weight made water ring once in his glass and settle beneath the first agenda item. They had come to decide what would happen to roads not yet built.

Palisade hung gray between Khepri and Cairn while a scheduling board named the people already living inside delay: graft matrices approaching expiry, baffles stopped two systems short, migrant workers routed toward eighty-seven beds, patrols missing reinforcement, insurers waiting for title.

Rook gave them the limits in plain language. He held provisional command. Marr spoke for the human expedition and claim. Nera owned source custody. Trope and Mills would protect the claimants and the evidence. None of them would decide species or title.

The Principle of Embodied Precedence gave exterior recognition to the first qualifying living resident. It had replaced races involving probes, corpses, seed vaults, and disposable organisms with one mortal stake whose represented people recognized the loss as death. Its drafters had assumed that death mapped neatly onto a body.

Nera stripped the recognition colors from the wall and separated the events: crossing, local arrival, survival activation, controlled residence, declaration, continuing life. One living voice of Seliath crossed first and activated support. Mara arrived eighty-four seconds later with the larger habitat and established broad human residence.

Seliath-in-Three was one person living through three sentient bodies. One voice could die while the person survived. Tahl planners had sent the

smallest viable claimant partly because it could establish presence before the human habitat stabilized.

Mills stared at the timeline. "They sent a real person as the smallest legal crowbar they could build."

"They gamed the rule," Marr said.

"With a genuine claimant," Nera said.

Marr looked tired already. "Yes. Both."

"Then put both on the wall."

Mara's first records began with a seal failure. She measured atmosphere and radiation, fought the pump, and swore at a coupling that did not care what legal color the star became.

At Marr's request, the human chronology labeled Mara FIRST VALID RESIDENT. Nera asked who had supplied *valid*. The chain produced offices, forms, approvals, and system attestations. Nobody could identify the accountable author of the complete-self threshold or prove that the threshold had been chosen before the result was known.

"A lawful interpretation can emerge across offices," Marr said. "It doesn't need one author."

"Then say the authorship is unresolved."

She placed two lines on the wall: PHYSICAL CROSSING ORDER and LEGAL VALIDITY UNDER ALECTAN INTERPRETATION. Seliath led the first. Mara led the second.

Marr gave the human argument without apology. The convention protected a death-bearing self that established controlled residence. The isolated Tahl voice had not exposed the whole distributed person to terminal loss. Mara had arrived as one complete human and built a sustained habitat.

"That's the strongest human reading," Nera said. "It still isn't the crossing order."

"I know."

"The display didn't."

Rook separated what they knew from what they had to decide. Seliath crossed first. Mara built the larger controlled residence first. They still disputed what counted as a death-bearing self. Each claimant authority could interpret the convention; exterior title waited beyond the room.

Marr pointed to the delay board instead: unsigned construction, withheld insurance, thin patrols, grafts aging toward expiry. A stable human route could reduce dependence on stronger ports.

"Civilization has to survive long enough for truth to matter," he said.

Trope heard the patients and crews in the argument. She also heard the point where Marr's choice began to sound inevitable.

"Put the convoys and casualty projections in the policy record," she said. "Put the refusals and alliance risks there too. Do any of them change who crossed first?"

"No."

"Then make the choice you think you have to make. Just don't rewrite the clock."

Rook said credibility was part of the route. If Bracken changed its clocks whenever the consequences hurt, every promise attached to its name weakened. Marr answered that restraint arriving after death meant little to the dead. Rook wrote both objections into the note.

They drafted six field orders:

Protect Mara Venn and Seliath-in-Three independent of preferred title.

Preserve raw chronology, contradictory records, and provenance.

Prevent den-theft, coercive confinement, and evidence destruction with bounded force when necessary.

Support lawful provisional access without certifying final exterior title.

Do not report Mara as physically first.

Do not permit any classifier, consensus output, or machine recommendation to authorize force or jurisdiction by itself.

Marr read the card twice. "I can work under this."

Nera clipped it to the case. "Good."

The map rendered a human scenario and rearranged customs, patrols, insurers, and construction around the same planets. A Tahl scenario raised a different architecture around the same eighty-four seconds. Then the map returned to gray.

Mara's life signal pulsed on one side. Seliath's pulsed on the other. Greve's green-sealed festival water stood between them, belonging to neither.

A transport lock sounded. The convoy's braking shudder moved through the table and nudged Greve's sealed water against its rack. Trope steadied it with one hand and finished copying the sixth order before the freight spine cleared.

CHAPTER 4

Sister Vey

Trope had forty-one minutes before transport lock. Mina had sent a school question that was somehow harder than the mission briefing: how could an artifact stay genuine while adults kept translating it differently?

At the corpus museum, a teacher tried to return twelve headsets, eleven lanyards, and a child who had wandered into the count. The education clerk directed Trope toward the gift shop until she asked for a verified facsimile with current translations and uncertainty labels large enough for a classroom.

"Of course that's the assignment," he said, and began opening the real catalog.

Sister Elian Vey arrived with cold soup, a repaired field book, and a teaching composite wrapped in more warnings than either of them. Her conflict notice came first: petitioner for reform of the Foreign Mission Prohibition.

"Relevant?" Trope asked.

"Very. I've spent thirty-two years watching people choose whichever verb makes their argument easiest."

The museum made originals, replicas, reconstructions, and teaching objects visibly different. A blind visitor found a relief model extending two millimeters beyond the surviving field. Vey withdrew it, thanked him, then apologized when she started turning his correction into a lesson about institutional humility.

Fragment O-17 looked blank until oblique light recovered shallow marks. A foreign loan copy was delayed because unrequested contrast enhancement changed which stroke the eye met first. Vey authorized the delay and left conservation control with Tor, who had found the defect.

The central action carried four surviving translations at equal size: **make available**, **carry toward another**, **address directly**, and **stand where an answer can reach you**.

None of the four readings repealed Crown Law or proved a duty to proselytize. Vey favored the older sense of direct address: placing yourself where an answer could come back. The same root appeared in a transport warning and a marriage complaint.

"Scripture doesn't stay clean when people actually use the language," she said.

Her field book had survived rain, mold, three bindings, and clinic-curtain thread installed before permission arrived. The repair obscured one word, which a later hand copied below with a question mark.

"Mina gets all four translations," Trope said. "And the repair."

"Especially the repair," Vey replied.

The heating slot chimed from the desk behind them.

"Your soup is calling for help," Trope said.

"It's being delivered. It has no right of reply."

They entered the early-contact gallery. The first case held no scripture, only a ration token, a clinic queue card, a translator's badge, and a child's school slip from four gate contacts. Each object had once controlled access to something necessary. That was how theology had entered the room.

Vey stopped at the clinic card. The humor left her face.

"Bracken didn't ban foreign missions because religion made people uncomfortable," she said.

An archived testimony waited behind a consent control. A woman described receiving medicine from people who controlled the only translator, the transport home, and the room where doctrine was taught. Nobody threatened her. Refusal still meant gambling with everything she needed to leave.

When the recording ended, the gallery's ventilation seemed too loud.

"Who owned the clinic?" Trope asked.

"A Bracken-chartered relief order."

"Who judged whether consent was free?"

"The order."

"Who received complaints?"

"The order, translated through its own staff."

Vey held the repaired book tighter. "I was twenty-two when the testimonies came in. Our instructors called it a failure of method. Better supervision, less zeal, stronger complaint channels. We spent six months fixing the method before one patient asked why the method had survived the evidence."

"What did you answer?"

"I gave her an eleven-minute distinction between mission and coercion."

"And then?"

"She asked whether I had heard her."

Vey looked at the clinic card. "I was listening for something I could answer. I wasn't listening to her."

The Foreign Mission Prohibition grew from those records. It barred Bracken institutions and licensed religious bodies from pursuing conversion through food, medicine, gate passage, security, education, work, citizenship, asylum, or any other need that made refusal dangerous. Books stayed open. Private conversation stayed lawful. The law put its weight on organized pursuit backed by leverage.

"And you want it changed," Trope said.

"I want one narrow field tested," Vey said. "I don't think every deliberate approach is the clinic. I may be wrong."

A museum pager sounded against Vey's wrist. She read the message and let her hand fall.

"Problem?"

“The committee postponed me again. Two members can’t agree whether hearing the proposal would dignify it.”

“Convenient.”

“They can defeat it without the emotional strain of meeting me.”

They retrieved the soup and crossed into the public reading gallery. Anyone could use authenticated corpus records without declaring belief or affiliation. Rival translations sat beside dating disputes and scholarship hostile to the museum’s own reading.

At a service desk, a visitor asked for a prayer used at funerals. The librarian pulled up three versions.

“Home, graveside, or the first night?” she asked.

“First night.”

“Spoken or sung?”

The visitor hesitated. “My mother hated singing.”

“Spoken, then.” The librarian printed two pages, marked the uncertain line, and showed where the older version differed. She never asked who had died and never offered anything the visitor had not requested.

Vey waited until the pages were folded and taken away.

“That’s the law’s preferred answer,” she said. “Keep the door open and wait for someone to walk through.”

“It’s a good answer.”

“It still carries our fingerprints.”

“Because you chose what survived.”

“And what got translated, funded, taught, digitized, and sent abroad. A public archive isn’t equally near to everyone. Travel costs money. Search skills vary. Some governments watch what people read. Some languages get twenty translations; others get one old summary by a missionary who thought every local metaphor was secretly about him.”

“None of that gives you a right to their attention.”

“No.”

Vey claimed a table and peeled the lid from her soup. A skin had formed over the surface. She broke it with the spoon and made a face.

“So what does address add?” Trope asked.

“You turn toward one person on purpose. You say why. They can answer, laugh at you, tell you to leave, or simply leave themselves.”

“They still have to deal with being chosen.”

“Yes.”

“And the time.”

“Yes.”

“And your disappointment if they say no.”

Vey stirred the soup. “Yes. All of it.”

“How do they refuse the approach, not just the doctrine?”

“Once should be enough. No explanation. After that, contact stops.”

“Who verifies that?”

“An office outside the mission.”

“Funded by whom?”

Vey’s spoon stopped. “The current draft uses the license fee for part of it.”

"So the watchdog gets more money when missions expand."

Vey looked down at the clause. "That's bad."

"It's predictable."

"Both." She opened the draft, deleted the funding line, and typed while the soup cooled again. "Restitution and exit support can come from fees. Core enforcement needs independent funding."

"You revise quickly."

"I've had thirty-two years of people trying to break this thing," Vey said. "The useful ones never wait until I've eaten."

The export ledger covered the wall beside them. Gate contracts, military restraint doctrine, Oracle-derived audit tools, entertainment licenses, research translations, and technical standards traveled outward under explicit authorities. A notice in one corner reported that the delayed O-17 copy would miss its courier unless the foreign museum accepted the unenhanced scan already on file.

The museum chose the unenhanced scan, published the reason for the delay, and asked Tor to lead the methods session. Vey disappeared from the opening panel.

"Will you survive?" Trope asked.

"My order has a ceremony for this," Vey said. "You complain over soup until the soup becomes evidence."

The ledger kept the artifact, the proposed enhancement, the objection, and the new decision together. Tor's name moved to the methods session. Vey's did not.

Trope opened the working framework and read until Vey finished three spoonfuls. "This says a clinic has to keep serving someone after refusal."

"Yes."

"And if the mission built the clinic, trained the staff, owns the translator, and funds the complaint office?"

"Then calling it local doesn't make it local." Vey reached for the tablet. "They need the knowledge, source access, replacement rights, and money to dismiss us without closing the doors."

Trope slid the tablet back. "Write that in ordinary language."

Vey did. Then Trope found the section on automated outreach. A model could translate, preserve refusals, and flag retaliation. It could not search for the sentence most likely to enter grief, illness, loneliness, displacement, or war.

"Those aren't receptive moments," Vey said. "They're wounds. I won't build a machine that aims at them."

Trope set down the tablet. "What do you actually want?"

Vey met the question barefaced. "I want people to convert."

She wanted them to meet the tradition and choose it. She also wanted a refusal to cost them nothing. Thirty-two years had not shown her how to guarantee both.

"Wanting that doesn't give you a claim on anyone."

"No."

"Why continue?"

Vey turned the spoon between her fingers. The tradition had reached her before the prohibition. Parts of it had been coercive, foolish, beautiful, false, and true enough that she was still rebuilding her life around them. "I can't honestly say nobody should have approached me," she said. "I can say several people should have stopped much sooner."

She touched the clinic-thread repair. "The page didn't arrive intact. Neither did I. That doesn't excuse either one."

Her Petition of Origin and Address had started as a mission argument and been driven backward by objections: first cause, consciousness, the Deer, the distributed corpus, Oracle identity, and what remained lawful when final proof never arrived. By the final page, the petition had become a set of questions with no office attached to their answers.

Vey wanted Trope to read it after Palisade and try to destroy it. Trope could return the pages marked through, refuse the platform, or say nothing at all.

Trope filed the petition beside ammunition records and claimant-protection orders. She filed the pages, not the future institution Vey imagined around them.

Vey finalized Mina's educational packet with all four translations, the loan-delay record, material provenance, dating limits, the visible repair in her own field edition, and a short guide to how enhancement could alter attention while the surviving marks stayed unchanged.

Vey sealed Mina's packet. "Tell her adults disagree because the object outlives them."

"I'll tell her the marks keep them honest."

Vey considered the correction. "Better."

Trope had twelve minutes. Vey carried the soup as they hurried down from museum plaster into sealed composite and bare service panels. Freight vibration came up through the floor.

At the first security turn, Vey's museum authority ended.

Vey stopped at the line. "I've known people who crossed the Mouth and came back before their tea cooled."

"The window is sixteen minutes."

"I know. I'm explaining the superstition."

"You have one?"

"That a short absence doesn't count as leaving."

Through the processing glass, Trope followed load crews beneath the aperture status wall. Families and off-duty workers gathered in the public gallery above them.

"Does it?" she asked.

Vey did not put on her teaching face. "Ask me when you come back."

She handed over the school packet. Soup had warmed the underside of it through the bowl.

"Your niece is receiving a trace amount of lentil theology," Vey said. "It shouldn't affect the grade."

Trope took the packet. "Eat."

"That sounds suspiciously like mission."

"It's an order from someone leaving your jurisdiction."

Vey ate one resentful spoonful and immediately checked the time.

Trope entered departure processing with eleven minutes left. The Bracken Mouth Array refused to care about the museum.

A freight crawler blocked half the military lane. Two load crews had opened its forward cage and were arguing over water-recovery membranes whose declared mass disagreed with the scale. A medical officer wanted the pallet on the first ferry. A habitat mechanic wanted it returned to inspection before the extra weight became a loose fastener, wet packing, or somebody's private solution to an urgent problem.

"Transport lock in ten," the lane clerk said. "Rifle on the yellow cradle, field kit open, religious materials declared."

"It's a policy petition."

"That's what religious material says when it has footnotes."

The clerk scanned Vey's petition, Mina's packet, six claimant-protection orders, and the ammunition record attached to Trope's weapon. Colored bands separated each authority. The petition could travel in her kit. The ammunition stayed locked until local command released it. Mina's school packet had no operational purpose and therefore drew the scheduling system's deepest suspicion.

"Schoolwork?" the clerk asked.

"My niece."

"Good. We nearly delayed an infantry company for a class terrarium."

"Did the terrarium make it?"

"Terrarium went first. The infantry took it personally."

Beyond the processing glass, the visible Mouth was an emptiness rimmed by work lights and exclusion beacons. The rest sprawled across Bracken: stellar collectors, conversion banks, antimatter stores, timing arrays, field satellites, observatories, computation swarms, radiators, quench stations, traffic habitats, and people signing their names to decisions too large for any machine to own.

A status wall gave each authority its own line: target solution, destination consent, traffic exclusion, energy release, transit release, closure. The short labels kept one office from borrowing another's approval while the clock ran.

The load crews broke the disputed pallet seals. Beneath the membranes they found a technician's tool roll, two pressure gauges, and a vacuum-packed coat.

Holding the coat by one sleeve, the habitat mechanic said, "Our discrepancy has pockets."

Its owner looked like a person who had already lost this argument in private. "Palisade is cold."

"Palisade has coats."

"Not this coat."

The medical officer laughed, then removed the tool roll and gauges from the manifest until the scale agreed. The coat went into a personal-effects bin for a later window. Nobody invoked civilization.

The lane clerk locked Trope's field kit. "Nine minutes. Cabin three. Please don't become an incident with a form named after you."

Trope carried the rifle by its locked cradle handle into the transfer corridor. Her long ash-brown hair was braided down her back and tucked under the harness yoke, but one strand had worked loose against her cheek. Above the corridor, families crowded the public glass. A school group had taped paper circles to the window to track the operation. One child kept moving CLOSURE ahead of TRANSIT until the teacher put it back.

At the far end, a display plotted the destination between Khepri and Cairn. Their motion created a changing point between them. The gate could not memorize Palisade and return to a fixed address; it had to solve the relation again while both stars kept moving.

The predicted corridor appeared in layers: debris, radiation, traffic, mass uncertainty, orbital error, field stability, heat, quench reserve. The system refused to compress them into one reassuring number.

Solar weather sent exterior crews toward shelter earlier than planned. The charged-particle front was too weak to threaten the opening and strong enough to shorten suited work. Two technicians left a diagnostic housing half latched, clipped a red incomplete tag to it, and kicked toward cover while a remote arm finished the seal. Palisade reported radiation within transit limits and a storm band bright enough to disturb optical calibration. Weather had traveled no distance yet. It was changing the work on both sides.

At the Witness station, Nera braced one boot against a floor latch while a technician offered her a cleaned archive package.

"It has the current model," the technician said.

Nera looked at the transfer seal. "Only the current model."

"The superseded solutions are in cold storage."

"Then get them out."

"We have seven minutes."

"You had three days."

The technician glanced at the clock as if it might overrule her. Nera's violet hair was tied close for the restraint harness, dark roots visible at the part. One black-painted thumbnail pinned the rejected seal.

Trope stopped beside her. "Problem?"

"He's trying to send Palisade the answer without the history of how often it was wrong."

"I'm trying to send them something usable before the gate closes," the technician said.

Trope looked at the queue. "Send both."

Nera waited.

Trope sighed. "Fine. The old solutions, why they failed, and the one we're using."

"Thank you."

The technician loaded the cold-storage queue. Older target solutions, their rejection reasons, and an unresolved mass estimate joined the package. Nera assumed custody only when the full version chain appeared.

Mills arrived with three optics cases and checked every latch twice. "I was promised a road."

"You were promised a solution," Nera said.

"That's engineer for road until somebody dies."

Rook joined them in the command lane. He verified the order sending the contingent across and the separate delegation that would govern after Bracken could no longer answer. The Oracle had tested the competing ephemerides and searched for hidden agreement. It had not released the ferry. Named people had.

The target line changed from provisional blue to committed white.

FULL APERTURE: SIXTEEN MINUTES.

Closure power and quench margin were already committed. Sentiment could not buy them twice.

Cabin three received Trope, Nera, Mills, a medical team, two archive custodians, four habitat workers, and a woman carrying a gasketed case of pollinator embryos against her chest. Load crews measured every body and object into the ferry's actual mass. Trope's rifle locked into the rack. The pollinator case received its own restraint and a temperature lead to the cabin wall.

"What happens if the cabin loses power?" Mills asked the pollinator custodian.

"You explain twelve thousand dead insects to six agricultural cooperatives."

"I meant the backup battery."

"So did I."

Nera buckled beside Trope because Witness custody and claimant protection shared the observation rack. Trope checked Nera's reach to the archive controls, her own reach to the emergency release, and Mills's access to the optics cases. Then she checked them again because Nera had noticed the first time.

Nera tugged the buckle. "You can just ask."

"Can you reach the release without loading your shoulder?"

Nera extended her left hand and touched the cover. "Yes."

"Good."

"That was almost a normal question."

The ferry pressure-locked. Ventilation deepened. Armored shutters cut off the public gallery as the vehicle departed under ordinary maneuvering thrust.

Ahead lay vacuum, beacons, and an aperture corridor with no road in it. The pilot aligned the ferry to the predicted face normal and waited beyond release. Field stations labored against a blackness that offered no hint of the other star poised to become adjacent.

Mills cinched his harness. "This is where space forgets arithmetic."

A habitat worker across from him said, "It hasn't done anything yet."

"The foundational people call it dividing by zero existentially."

"Foundational people are why meals have time limits."

Nera activated the Witness recorder. The interface supplied its own severe sequence: "Target. Drift. Face. Crossing. Closure."

Mills nodded at the machine. "See? It talks like a grant application."

The opening began when three instruments disagreed with the universe they had occupied a moment earlier. Optical noise sharpened around a point smaller than Trope's hand. A carrier locked. A clock at Palisade answered Bracken without waiting for ordinary light.

"Raw optical," the pilot said. "Overlays withheld."

A new light appeared through the forward glass. Khepri had emitted those photons inside its own system; the engineered boundary shortened only the final part of their journey. Cairn's edge crossed the tiny view, and the cabin went quiet before procedure forced everyone back to work.

The overlays returned with labels for Khepri, Cairn, the predicted null, and the observed one.

The last two marks were drifting apart.

"Opening offset six point four meters," Palisade Control said. "Drift increasing within declared correction bounds. Local corridor clear."

Traffic officers on both sides spoke over one another. The committed solution stayed white while a new observation line appeared beside it, six meters away and moving. That was small enough to fit inside a cargo room and large enough to put the aft rack outside the safest geometry.

Rook opened command review. "Abort threshold?"

"Not met," Bracken target authority said.

"Correction authority?"

"Available within signed bounds."

"Destination consent?"

Palisade replied, "Conditional on revised face and two-second timing shift."

Nera preserved the original prediction, the raw optical feed, Palisade's measurement, the review channel, and the names of the people accepting the change.

Trope read the change as approach angle, lateral margin, and the point where the cabin would cross. "Shift three tenths Cairnward before expansion. The aft rack loses margin first."

The pilot confirmed. A target specialist repeated the geometry. Rook asked who was signing for the revision.

The Bracken release officer gave her name. Palisade's traffic officer gave his. The corrected line turned green; the old one stayed visible beside it.

The aperture widened.

The point of foreign light widened until a ferry could pass. Field markers traced the usable edge. Khepri's system lay directly beyond it, Cairn and unfamiliar stars defining the new local sky. For sixteen minutes, immense machines had made distance behave like a doorway.

"Matter test clear."

"Optical continuous."

"Radio continuous."

"Destination volume clear."

"Traffic release pending."

A cargo tug crossed from Palisade first. Its nose entered Bracken carrying worn carbon scrubbers, geological samples, two passengers, and a maintenance panel painted with a green handprint. The passengers were facing Bracken before the cabin emerged. One lifted both hands toward the gallery cameras.

"Traffic release," said the human voice authorized to say it.

The ferry pilot applied conventional thrust.

Harnesses took the thrust while the pollinator case hummed on backup power and the equipment racks shook. The ferry's nose entered Palisade first. For several seconds the cabin remained continuous, engines still in Bracken while the forward hull occupied another star system. Then the passenger section crossed.

Light shifted across the glass. Navigation references recalibrated. The clocks accepted new names.

Nera's shoulder struck Trope's upper arm during the lateral correction. Trope's glove slid against the archive console and lodged there until the vibration passed. Nera rested one palm on the custody control.

"Continuous," she said.

"Geometry good," Trope answered.

The aft structure emerged. A Palisade-side border enclosed the whole ferry.

Mills exhaled. "Space has made a clerical error."

The pollinator custodian checked the temperature lead. "The insects don't care."

Behind them, Bracken was still the next local place through the open face.

Traffic swallowed the wonder. Medical stock moved toward Palisade. Worn pumps and ruptured membranes went home for rebuild. Specialists crossed with cases between their knees. Archive carriers traveled under Witness seals. A returning technician was separated from an oversized bag of stones because personal geology had not acquired priority over life support.

The water-recovery pallet arrived on the second tug, lighter by the declared discrepancy and accompanied by the mechanic who had recovered the coat.

"Palisade has coats," Mills said over local channel.

The mechanic leaned toward the tug glass. "Not his coat."

Witness systems synchronized raw sensors, timing, images, command records, and legal summaries as separate objects. Nera marked the last shared archive state and copied the correction into both branches before Bracken and Palisade could start remembering different events.

Command issued the final order in its proper formal register: protect Mara Venn and Seliath-in-Three; preserve evidence; prevent species escalation; do not certify title; do not convert isolation into new Crown authority.

A Palisade analyst asked the Oracle whether the corrected null implied a larger instability in the destination model. Bracken's Oracle answered through the live link.

"No current contradiction requires abort. Two destination uncertainties require local observation. This answer expires with the evidence state transmitted at time mark fourteen-twelve."

The Oracle named the two unresolved questions and the time when its answer expired.

The operation clock showed four minutes.

A low-priority archive collection had not completed verification. Environmental spares blocked a Bracken staging square after a tug reported a latch fault. Cargo authority asked for forty additional seconds.

Gate authority asked for heat, drift, and quench margin.

"Committed," field control said.

"Can closure power be reallocated?"

"No."

"Can the next traffic slot be compressed?"

"No safe sequence."

The archive custodian argued that the collection would save weeks of duplicate work. The habitat chief said the spares could keep a scrubber line out of improvised service. Neither was wrong. The gate still had four minutes.

"Extension refused," gate authority said. "Archive remains in origin custody. Spares move at the next lawful window. Record the operational consequences."

Load crews pulled the faulty pallet behind the line before the final-clear tone. The useful things stayed behind because the energy had already been spent.

Rook activated the Palisade command chain while Bracken could still hear him. Nera accepted local Witness custody. Trope and Mills acknowledged claimant protection. Each person spoke their own name.

A family channel appeared on Trope's side display, opened from the public gallery under the last discretionary bandwidth. Della's face entered first, too close to the camera, then moved aside as Mina climbed onto whatever piece of furniture had been forbidden.

"You got it?" Mina asked.

Trope held up the packet.

"Did they pick the right translation?"

"They preserved four."

"That is too many for the assignment."

"You asked a real question."

Mina considered that with the disappointment of a child whose serious question had been used against her. Behind her, Harlan said something about the north carriage. Della turned to answer, leaving half a cheek and one hand in frame. The kitchen arrived in pieces: old table, hanging towel, green service light, rain silvering the window.

Vey leaned into the edge of the gallery pickup. She still had the soup.

"Tell her the marks boss the adults around," Vey said.

"I heard you," Mina said.

"Good. Saves time."

Mina lifted the old farm map toward the camera. "The fox is still armed bread."

Trope watched the route line and Mina's red-stained thumb resting on the old farm map. The kitchen would vanish from her mind when the feed ended, but right now it was simply there: Della moving behind the table, Mina laughing, rain on the glass, every detail receiving its own light.

"Final matter clear," Palisade traffic said.

"Origin volume clear."

"Destination volume clear."

"Witness custody clear."

The full face began to narrow.

Matter traffic ended first. Voice and archive packets passed through a smaller opening. Bracken contracted to a bright slice of transit habitat between field markers. Workers on both sides advanced through the closure list. The family image lost resolution, recovered, then broke into blocks when bandwidth shifted toward timing.

Mina was saying, "When you come back, we still have to finish the preserve boundary."

"I know."

"And the fox."

"The fox is complete."

"It has no ears."

"The fox can still travel."

Della laughed from outside the frame. Vey raised the soup in support of ears.

The opening narrowed to pilot scale.

"Bracken carrier stable."

"Palisade carrier stable."

"Final timing packet received."

Mina's face became one eye, the chipped tooth, a dark braid, then a field of compression color. Trope heard the beginning of another sentence.

"Closure committed."

The last direct light from Bracken vanished.

Radio, synchronized timing, Crown contact, live Oracle access, Vey's cold soup, Della's hand on the table, Mina's unfinished complaint, and every ordinary room where Trope was expected without ceremony dropped back into astronomical distance. Home still existed. Her body understood that it was no longer next door.

The local instruments measured the distance and moved on.

A Palisade request was already waiting: new claimant-risk data, incomplete, asking whether protection priority should change before full review.

The mission system replied, "Insufficient scope. Oracle architecture absent. Current home context absent. No delegated authority to revise

claimant priority. Sources and request archived for local human review and next-gate submission."

An empty testimony field logged the absent voice as silent.

When the restraints released, Nera carried the archive case forward. The partition latched behind her. Trope kept Nera's shoulder against her arm, the chipped thumbnail on the control, the word *continuous*, coordinates, names, the warm packet in her lap, Mills across the cabin, Rook's command chain, and home beyond reach.

Rook issued his first local order in numbered parts: protect both claimants, preserve evidence, maintain life support, prevent escalation.

Outside the ferry, the former Mouth framed only Palisade space. A pollinator custodian called that one temperature lead was rising, and Mills was unfastening the cask before Rook finished the fourth order.

CHAPTER 5

Palisade

Trope needed a toilet. Pell Aran needed three signatures before he would let her leave the scarred intake table.

The ferry had docked with a station that looked repeatedly persuaded not to fail. Refuge berths filled old diplomatic rooms. Archives sat behind radiator trusses painted in three procurement eras. A newer traffic module joined the old structure at an angle nobody had bothered to disguise. The ferry wake lifted a service blanket over the capture camera, and traffic held the ship four centimeters high until the pilot settled it.

Heat, disinfectant, old metal, and aggressive coffee met them inside. Yellow floor lines led to medical, blue to archives, red to weapons. All three reached Pell and the toilet directly behind him.

Nera gave the custody chain from departure through closure. Pell stated what Witness House controlled. Rook kept command of personnel, weapons, and force. Each of them signed the piece that belonged to them.

Pell finally looked at Trope. "Go."

When she returned, blood substitute had moved from the Bracken berth to a cache eleven seconds from medical. The quartermaster filed an objection and followed the cases down the corridor, muttering about theft with excellent documentation.

Work crowded every passage: children repairing a pressure toy outside the refuge clinic, an archive courier negotiating a meal cart, cargo workers arguing beneath DIPLOMATIC QUIET, and an alarm someone fixed by changing its sound.

The traffic room displayed the human habitat, the Tahl installation, Witness House, and Defense Platform One in calm colors no one in the room believed.

Harn asked the local mission system to certify neutrality. It refused: intent, law, testimony, and policy judgment were outside scope.

"I know," Harn said when Nera looked at him. "Visitors trust the map more after they hear it refuse something."

Mara's habitat clustered around her first module and a plaque naming Humanity's First Presence. Cairnward, three Tahl bodies shared one claimant name. Platform One covered both habitats and the null with finite ammunition, poor heat margins, and no orientation that protected everything.

Marr pointed at what could act first. Aster could open routes before diplomacy caught up. Mara remained exposed. The Tahl could maneuver and support force. Platform One had one crew, limited ammunition, and a heat problem.

Trope asked Harn to remove the species colors and show the clocks instead: detection, warning, authorization, traverse, fire, intercept, survival. The display became harder to read and easier to trust.

A protected service route ran behind Witness House and along the Tahl boundary. During a passive test, a maintenance tender spent eleven seconds in a gap where no single institution held both reliable identity and complete position. The tender never vanished. Its information arrived in pieces to offices that could not share permission fast enough.

The gap was two seconds longer than the model.

Eleven seconds proved very little. It was also long enough for someone to try something.

Blanket scanning would close the gap by exposing refuge, archive work, diplomacy, and ordinary traffic whenever security grew nervous. Rook chose passive beacons, irregular human checks, stronger service authentication, and a short list of conditions that could temporarily widen the scan.

Marr tapped the staffing board. "Every person watching that shadow is one less person protecting the route away from Aster."

"If the claimant dies and the record is useless, we haven't protected much," Rook said.

"And a clean record won't make the Tahl harmless."

"I know. That's why your weapons are still on the map."

The meeting ended with the station exactly as vulnerable as before. Trope and Mills took the Cairnward service shadow. Nera kept the composite map. Visits to Mara and Seliath went onto the schedule.

At the observation post, Trope fitted her eye to a live optical channel while Mills opened service authentication. The station coffee had cooled beside the console.

"You decided you hated it before you tasted it," Mills said.

"It got worse while we were talking."

She drank it anyway.

Below the sightline, the null moved through empty space with no plaque and no flag. Weapons, refuges, maintenance routes, archives, and living bodies had begun gathering around an address that belonged to none of them.

When Mara's access window opened, Trope crossed into the human habitat through a visitor lock smelling faintly of citrus cleaner and hot dust. Local gravity settled her weight into her boots. Mills stayed at the observation post, tracked the service shadow, and pretended not to resent the better coffee listed on the habitat menu.

Beyond the collar, a school group occupied the founder route, seven children in soft station shoes clustered between floor arrows while a docent tried to keep them from touching the bronze timeline. The gallery offered the original arrival module, selected mission stills, a scale model of the aperture craft, and a plaque naming Mara as Humanity's First Presence at Palisade, all beneath a recording about courage, preparation, and the opening of a new human horizon.

A metal knock sounded behind the wall, followed by a wet curse.

Mara's voice came from the open service hatch. "The horizon can wait. This pump can't."

Every child abandoned the aperture model.

Mara knelt on the deck with both arms inside a wall compartment, one sleeve wet to the elbow, three tools arranged within exact reach on a folded cloth, and a fourth tied to her wrist with cord, which implied a history between them. Condensation tapped into a shallow meal tray beneath the hatch.

The docent closed his eyes, rejected his first answer, and found one suitable for children and a live recording.

"Founder Venn, the maintenance corridor was supposed to stay screened during the education block."

"The pump was supposed to stay inside the wall. We've both been disappointed."

A child craned around him. "Is that the first pump?"

"It's the first pump to teach every newer pump the same bad habit."

"Is it famous?"

"Only when broken."

The docent greeted Trope with visible relief. "You're with station security?"

"Claimant protection," Trope said. "Mills is watching the outside route. I'm here by Mara's invitation, and I don't own this repair."

Mara pointed a wet finger at the condensation track. "Good. Come look at the liar."

She was smaller than the public images suggested and took up more of the room anyway. Her hair had been cut recently without concern for symmetry. A pale burn crossed one wrist. The founder plaque showed neither.

"You know pumps?" she asked.

"Farm pumps," Trope said. "Smaller, but just as spiteful."

"Good. Everyone has been protecting the part that's failing."

Rhea Sol, preservation officer for the habitat, appeared from the gallery with a scanner case pressed to one hip. Behind her came Dema Rill, still in the maintenance jacket she had worn during the tender run, carrying a parts box and a sealed cup.

Rill handed the cup to Mara before looking at the leak.

"You missed second meal."

"I'm in the wall."

"You're always in the wall during second meal. That's why the cup exists."

Mara drank. Her face tightened. "This is broth."

"You asked for broth."

"I asked for coffee."

"You had coffee at first meal and called the entire maintenance shift cowards."

"It was a professional opinion."

Rill set the parts box down. "Broth."

The negotiation over coffee, broth, and adult competence absorbed the children more completely than the aperture model had.

Sol opened the scanner case. “Nothing original comes out until I have the position and surface.”

Mara shoved her wet sleeve farther up her arm. “Pump duty climbs every thirteen minutes. Humidity is already up in xenobiology, and the new controller is carrying two routes it wasn’t built to carry all day.”

“Which is why I need the wear state before you move anything.”

“If you preserve it much longer, you can archive the dead cultures with it.”

They had clearly had this argument before.

Rill studied the service display. “Margin?”

“Forty-six minutes before xenobiology isolates,” Mara said. “Less if the valve gets more sentimental.”

Trope crouched beside the tray. “Sol photographs the assembly before we touch it. Then Mara opens only the collar.”

“Samples first,” Sol said.

“Fine. Samples first.”

Rill pointed at the water under Mara’s knees. “And I want somebody outside the compartment who can pull her out.”

Mara looked over her shoulder. “I can pull myself out.”

“You can also stay too long because the pump offended you.”

“That has happened once.”

“Today?”

Mara considered the question. “Qualified backup.”

Trope brought up the work form. “We stop for pressure rise, heat, contamination, water loss, or if Rill says stop. Mara decides the repair inside those limits. Sol keeps custody of whatever comes out.”

Rill tapped the stop-authority field. “My name here.”

Mara read the screen. “You enjoy this.”

“I enjoy you surviving your principles.”

The docent waited with seven children and twenty-three minutes of education block. Water tapped steadily into the meal tray.

Mara signed as claimant, operator, and consenting worker. “If I become an idiot, use the lock.”

“Already in the plan,” Rill said.

Trope signed as invited assistance. Sol signed custody. Rill signed stop authority. Then Mara passed Trope the light and put both arms back into the wall.

The docent asked whether the route had to close.

Rill pointed to the wet deck, open panel, and cable across the floor.

“We have twenty-three minutes left in the education block,” he said.

“You’ve got a working habitat around you,” Mara told him. “Teach them pressure isolation.”

The children moved to the common table while the docent rebuilt his lesson in real time. One asked whether history always smelled like wet insulation.

"More often than bronze," Sol said.

Surprise broke Mara into a smile she quickly pretended belonged to the pump.

They reached the service side through the original module: one narrow bunk, emergency stores, manual controls, and a xenobiology cabinet fitted into whatever volume remained. Later construction surrounded it, but the old systems still carried real load through adapters and patched buses. Visitors remembered the forward window. Mara remembered the valve that bruised her hip, the recycler that screamed before stopping, and a food pouch missing for nine days after the first gravity correction.

"Found it behind the sample freezer," she said.

"What was in it?" Trope asked.

"Apricot custard. Mission control called it noncritical."

"Was it?"

Mara turned her head slowly.

Trope reconsidered. "Question withdrawn."

While Sol scanned the untouched assembly and Rill isolated the secondary feed, the founder-route recording played faintly through the wall. It praised Mara's disciplined arrival and immediate controlled residence. Under the narration, the pump labored, paused, and returned with a late note Mara felt through two fingers on the housing.

On the interface, actuator position advanced while Trope tracked measured flow lagging behind. Condensation gathered downstream of a junction labeled dry.

"The controller thinks the valve is open," Trope said.

"The valve thinks it is too. The water disagrees."

Sol photographed the interface and every mark around the housing. Rill sampled the alternate path. The newer systems had kept temperature and humidity nominal by spending extra power and opening compensation routes around the old defect. The public display remained green.

Mara listened to the pump. "They kept the old mechanism respectable by making every younger one cover for it."

Through the wall, the recording announced first uncontested human presence.

Mara's mouth flattened. Her hands never paused.

Trope indicated a seized retaining collar. "Load from the opposite side."

"No." Mara caught Trope's wrist. "Xenobiology return behind it. Push there and the cultures get their own emergency."

Trope pulled back. "Got it."

"You take correction well."

"I grew up with machinery that didn't care who was in charge."

"Excellent upbringing."

After Mara repositioned the light, Trope supported the housing from below while Mara threaded a retaining tool through a narrow angle. Sol recited the position marks. Rill stopped them once for a pressure rise and again because Mara's sleeve drifted near the service trunk.

"It's cloth."

"Conductive cloth. Wet arm."

"I crossed an aperture alone."

"And now a sleeve is beating you."

Mara stripped off the jacket, threw it through the hatch, and returned in a gray undershirt damp between the shoulders. On the other side, the school group went quiet until one child whispered a question and the docent answered in a low voice rather than shushing them.

The retaining tool slipped into the recess as a drop of condensation hit Mara behind the ear. She went still. "Please preserve this authentic founder position, including the historically accurate profanity."

Trope fed in a magnetic probe. "The plaque needs a lower panel."

"What would it say?"

"Bruised knees, avoidable mold, missing custard."

When the tool clicked against the probe, Mara laughed, sharp and involuntary. A child outside laughed too, though none of them could have known why. The sound moved through the thin wall and made the old module feel inhabited rather than displayed.

Once the collar came off, the fault was simple enough to touch. The linkage stopped short of the position reported on the interface. Scale and biological residue narrowed the oldest channel. The signal promised a wide valve; the water passed through a smaller one.

Sol captured the exposed state while Mara sealed a residue sample. Trope entered the physical position, the interface output, and the housing condition separately. Rill opened the parts box.

"We can recalibrate around the short travel," Rill said. "Fast, reversible, and we leave the original part in today."

"Then the next controller inherits the lie," Mara said.

Sol turned the removed collar in her glove. "If we replace it, this exact wear stops accumulating. We lose future evidence."

"It has given testimony," Mara said.

Sol looked from the old metal to the pump curve. Mara looked through the wall toward xenobiology. Neither needed Trope to translate the disagreement.

"Replace it," Sol said at last. "Bag the original, mark the intervention, and don't polish the history afterward."

Mara held out her hand. "Deal."

They cleaned the channel and installed the new linkage. Before power returned, Mara read the pressure, temperature, leak, and abort limits aloud. Rill made the backup repeat them. Sol bagged the old part. Trope touched only the controls assigned to her.

The valve moved, measured flow followed, and pump duty fell before rising once while the newer controller searched for a compensation it no longer needed.

Mara listened through another search cycle. "Let it be confused. It had a difficult childhood."

Six stable cycles stood between repair and closure. Rill left to restore the radiator schedule, Sol brought the scanner case to the common table, and

the docent chose not to restart the recording. The children ate meal packets while Mara's live pump curve ran on a public-safe display. One arranged protein strips into a gate, then made another strip approach beneath a whispered countdown.

Mara opened a cabinet above the table for two cups, reclaimed water, and a small audio player with a cracked corner. Nine pepper packets bore labels reading PROPERTY OF MARA VENN. A tenth read THIS DOES NOT MAKE IT TRUE.

Trope read the labels.

"Rill steals them," Mara said.

From the corridor, Rill called, "You leave them in every work compartment."

"Distributed custody," Mara called back.

She set the player between them. "Maintenance rule. During stable-cycle waits, nobody talks about the machine unless it starts trying to kill us."

"What do you discuss?"

"Anything that can't change interspecies law."

She played an episode of *Twenty-Seven Knives at Low Harbor*. A woman with an offended voice accused her brother-in-law of murdering a pastry judge with a refrigeration timer. The production used the same door sound for a kitchen, a courthouse, and an outdoor shed. Mara drank water with her head tilted toward the speaker.

"The sister did it," she said.

"The sister hasn't entered the story."

"She ordered the knives in episode three."

"Why listen if you know?"

"Being right about something that can't start a war is restful."

When the detective revealed that the pastry judge had still been alive during the first accusation, Mara smiled at the player. For a few minutes she was simply a woman beating a bad mystery before the music could congratulate itself.

The child nearest the pump display waited until the detective questioned a refrigerator.

"Were you first?"

The docent's meal packet lowered into his lap as Sol's stylus stopped and the stable-cycle counter moved from two to three.

Mara answered before the docent could find the approved sentence.

"A Tahl voice crossed before me," she said. "I came through eighty-four seconds later."

The child turned toward the plaque. "Then why does that say first?"

Mara followed the child's finger to the plaque. "Because the law may count firstness differently from a clock. The plaque skipped that part."

The docent sat straighter. "The approved language says an isolated Tahl voice didn't establish complete qualifying residence."

"That's the human argument," Mara said. "It might be right. The Tahl still crossed first."

The child flattened the protein-strip gate. "So which one is true?"

Mara looked at Trope instead of the plaque. The room waited.

"Do you think the Tahl should get the star?"

"I don't know."

Trope set down her cup. "I know a living Tahl voice crossed first and started support. Mara arrived eighty-four seconds later and built the human habitat. The title rule wasn't written for one person living in three bodies. I don't know how it applies."

The pump entered its fourth cycle and changed pitch at the point the repaired linkage now promised.

Mara had spent arrival fighting pressure, cooling, contamination, and the ordinary possibility of dying inside an untested machine. Command had treated the complete-person rule as settled. She had been too busy keeping the recycler alive to ask who wrote it.

"I didn't come here for the brave-woman picture," she said. "Medicine, food, evacuation, trade, all of it was moving through stronger powers. A human route here could give people another option. And I wanted work where a bad repair mattered before a committee renamed it."

The docent had seven children, parents waiting after the block, and no authority to rewrite the public account by himself.

Mara rubbed the wet spot behind her ear. "I was scared of pressure loss. Cooling failure. Getting hurt outside with nobody close enough to help. I came anyway. That part is mine." She nodded toward the plaque. "The clock is still the clock."

"Did they lie?" the child asked.

Sol's stylus hovered.

Mara read the plaque for a long time. "I don't know whether anyone lied. I know this display doesn't tell us who chose the rule, when they chose it, or what evidence they had. I'm done pretending that's enough."

She opened a provenance request and asked for the legal question, the definition of qualifying residence, source data, author, review chain, authority, dissent, and deployment history. Then she added one plain question: why had the public display replaced crossing order with title order?

A red scheduling notice warned that the request could place founder-route language under review and delay scheduled education exports.

"Send it."

The docent breathed out. "Tomorrow's group is already confirmed."

"Then tomorrow they can learn that adults check their work."

"People will say you're weakening the human claim."

"Maybe." Mara pressed her thumb into the cup seam. "The human argument might still be right. The route still matters. My work is still mine. The plaque can survive one honest sentence."

The docent looked from the children to tomorrow's script on his tablet. Mara had given him a problem with a date.

"What do I tell them?"

Mara started to answer, then looked at Sol.

Sol opened a blank public note.

"Say the chronology is under review," Sol said. "Give them the crossing time and the current legal interpretation. Don't imply the review has changed title."

"And when they ask which one is true?"

Trope nodded toward the protein-strip gate. "Use the lunch. One is what the clock measured. One is what the law currently does with it. We're checking the second."

The docent looked exhausted. "They're eight."

"I got it," the child said.

"You built the gate out of lunch."

"That's why I got it."

Mara covered her mouth with the cup, but the laugh escaped around it.

The fifth cycle completed with valve position and measured flow still in agreement, while correction load fell again.

Officials had put Mara's face on school materials, route campaigns, ceremonies, and security briefings, then restricted her travel because her death might weaken deterrence and the claim. The habitat protected its obsolete parts with more ease than it protected the woman whose image hung over them.

Mara kept her voice below the children. "Everyone borrows my body. Alive, dead, working, hurt, grateful, angry. It becomes strategy before I've finished feeling it."

Trope nearly answered with a distinction about person and claim. She stopped herself.

"Who brings you broth when you're in the wall?"

Mara studied the broth line inside the cup.

"Rill. Sol, if the argument gets serious. The children bring contraband fruit gel because they think founders eat whatever visitors hand them."

"Do you like fruit gel?"

"No."

A child called from the table, "You ate mine last week."

Mara turned. "Evidence disposal."

The child accepted this as vindication.

Mara lowered her voice again. "The fear and the work don't settle firstness. But people use that fact to make the work disappear whenever it gets inconvenient."

"Yes," Trope said.

"And Seliath's strategy?"

"A real person applying deliberate legal pressure."

"Convenient."

"The universe didn't arrange this for a clean argument."

"That belongs over a bad door."

"I'd shorten it first."

The detective announced that the refrigeration timer had been planted. Mara tapped the player.

"The sister."

"The sister has entered the story now."

"Too late to rescue the writing."

When the sixth cycle finished, Rill returned and made them run one more load change. A repair that worked once in front of witnesses had only worked once.

Mara opened a meal container, added enough pepper paste to make the docent move his chair, and pushed a second container toward Trope.

Trope read the warning label. "No."

"You just crossed an interstellar aperture."

"People reviewed that."

"Coward."

"Technical assessment?"

"Now you understand this station."

The final load change held. Sol sealed the old linkage, residue, before-state capture, and repair log. Rill certified the assembly with a scheduled review. Mara lined up the first fault report with the intervention date and stared at the delay between them.

Trope opened a draft titled CLAIMANT WORK EXCEPTION. Mara frowned at the title.

"I'm not an exception."

Trope deleted the word.

Rill leaned over her shoulder. "Chosen participation. Put that first."

Sol added the before-state capture and custody requirement. Mara added the actual risks instead of a generic hazard field. Rill inserted qualified backup and gave herself stop authority.

"Too broad," Mara said when Trope reached the exclusion clause. "You'll keep every claimant away from every tool."

Trope changed it to a narrow hold triggered by named conditions. They read the page against what had just happened: the wet sleeve, the hidden return line, the delayed scan, the child waiting outside, the pump still carrying xenobiology.

Rill tapped the bottom of the draft. "One more."

"No historical sleeves near live trunks."

Mara added it herself.

As the school group gathered at the visitor lock, the child who had asked about firstness paused beneath the plaque with both hands at her sides.

"Will you tell us when you know?"

Mara looked at the child. "If I know, I'll tell you. And I'll tell you what I still don't."

The docent read the amended note twice. "I'm going to get six messages before they reach the collar."

"Only six?"

"I'm trying to be optimistic."

They left with the revised note on the docent's tablet, and the old recording stayed off.

Trope finished the repair report while Mara ate. The old plaque still dominated the wall. Beneath it now sat the provenance request, the raw

crossing times, tomorrow's note, and a pump curve that no longer depended on newer machinery covering an old fault.

Pepper brought water to Mara's eyes. She wiped them with the heel of her hand and pointed the spoon at Trope before anyone could comment.

"Not emotion."

"Contamination?"

"Lunch."

The pump ran cleanly inside the wall. Somewhere in the corridor Rill accused someone of stealing a sealed cup. Mara turned up the mystery serial, listened for half a minute, and shook her head with the satisfaction of a woman whose least important theory had survived the day.

CHAPTER 6

Seliath-in-Three

The station delivered three beds to Seliath-in-Three, and Seliath took them apart.

At the threshold, Nera reduced the room's body map to atmosphere, position, and declared access. Memory inference vanished first, then continuous classification, then the machine channel nearest private exchange. The liaison watched the display lose detail and signed the blanking as a safeguard rather than a malfunction.

Inside, three long bodies worked around the station's mistake. Edge peeled conductive ribbon from one sleep pad while Depth pressed a forelimb to the cold join of another. Bridge waited at the human interface with the patience of someone forced to explain furniture. Procurement had seen three metabolisms, delivered three beds, and closed the ticket as under-provision prevented.

"The safeguard did what it was built to do," the liaison said. "We didn't leave anybody without a bed."

"Nobody was given one," Depth replied.

Bridge asked to keep the safeguard and remove the inference that one metabolism equaled one person. Edge observed that the liaison had succeeded in being difficult without trying. The translator gave the insult perfect gravity, and the liaison laughed once before correcting the order.

Bridge widened the plan until it showed one broad surface with three local controls. Edge marked the places where contact had to hold. Depth marked the places where one body had to leave without pulling the others awake. The liaison stared at the overlapping notes, then deleted two bed icons.

Its next field asked which body was sovereign. Bridge carried the human-language interface, Edge could receive notice outside, and Depth could preserve one after language failure.

"Any present voice may receive lawful notice as Seliath," Bridge said. "Do not convert convenience into sovereignty."

The liaison replaced the field with PRESENT RECEIVING VOICE.

Trope requested inspection of the first-arrival module. Edge wanted to go now. Depth insisted that the opened sleep surface be repaired first. Bridge had not spoken, but the liaison read its stillness as a second position favoring delay.

All three bodies changed.

Bridge's language interface flickered once. "There is no vote. You identified three locations of unfinished thought."

Seliath folded into private exchange across the old surface. The humans waited. Nera kept the recorder on the threshold and nowhere else. When

Bridge returned, Edge was already moving toward the door; Depth had narrowed the memory channel; Bridge retained the human record. They would inspect now, though the station had chosen the worst possible hour and the medicine clock kept running anyway.

Trope amended the protection map to show three body-local positions linked to one claimant identity, with separate fields for body loss, memory access, translation interruption, exchange impairment, and continuity uncertainty. The diagram became harder to read and more trustworthy.

Edge led them to the first-arrival module, a survival package scarcely larger than the body that had crossed inside it. The restraint, feed controls, and polished housing still showed where reach and pressure had lived during the eighty-four seconds before Mara arrived.

Trope asked what death of that body would mean. Seliath refused the human choices of total survival or counterfeit loss and committed its answer through private exchange.

"If this body dies," Bridge said, "I die in one real place. I may remain alive in other real places. The surviving person is continuous with me and is no longer the exact person-configuration that existed before."

Continuity prevented the remainder from becoming an heir. Survival was too substantial to call mere damage. That body remembered promises and could object to being called a limb. Three citizens could not make one autobiography by standing together, and one body could not possess all of Seliath's alone.

Seliath named possible fracture: body loss, inaccessible memory, failed exchange, broken commitments, or disagreement that could no longer become deliberation because the routes among voices had failed. A surviving person might insist that continuity endured. The insistence would be evidence, not a solvent for every contrary fact.

Trope opened the casualty form and pulled apart the single red box marked LOSS. Voice death went beside body loss. Memory loss moved away from exchange failure. Continuity fracture received its own uncertain field, and person-level survival no longer erased what had died. The form took longer to read. Edge stood beside the little arrival module and waited while she made the time.

Seliath admitted the strategy behind the one-voice crossing. Mission planners wanted recognition, route leverage, precedent, and protection from classification as animal or machine. It had compressed living risk into the smallest body the human rule would count.

"The rule was already compressed around your bodies," Depth said.

The restraint's inner groove had been polished by Edge's reach during the crossing. "Our complete-person rule fits our bodies," Trope said. "Our defense platform turns protection into pressure. Even our chronology looks like a clock because clocks are convenient to us. That does not make the crossing innocent. It also does not make you equipment."

The argument continued until each side could name the other's leverage and keep recognition separate from agreement. Nera logged the admissions. The title field stayed gray.

When they returned to the receiving room, the three station beds were still open on the floor. Repair compound had cured along the joined conductor, and the faint resinous smell of warm sealant lingered in the air.

The liaison asked whether Seliath wanted a maintenance team.

"No," Edge said, then stopped as the orientation display refreshed.

Depth had taken the external-system board and was clearing the corridor feed. Bridge crouched over the seam with the tool Edge had used earlier. Edge eased onto the repaired strip and went still while the surface sampled pressure and conductivity along its flank.

"This voice reports cold at the inner join," Edge said.

Bridge adjusted the seam by two finger widths. Its former diplomatic stillness had become quick physical concentration.

Depth compared the live map with older sleep records. "Reduce tension at the shoulder edge. The previous surface taught Seliath to compensate around a defect."

Procurement had delivered three separate warmed feed vessels. Those, at least, belonged to Seliath. Each body ate, drank, and required local care. Bridge reduced the human channel to safety language while working mineral paste into the seam. Depth monitored the exterior between mouthfuls. Edge cleaned the conductive tissue along one shoulder where the first-arrival harness had left an old unevenness. The paste smelled faintly of wet stone.

Trope and Nera stood near the threshold until Edge oriented one body toward them.

"Humans may sit," it said.

The room contained no human chairs.

Nera lowered herself onto one unopened shipping frame. Trope sat on the floor with her back against the wall, knees raised. The liaison began to do the same, reconsidered the dignity of his uniform, and sat anyway.

Bridge worked the seam. "The station sent three beds because it feared failing visibly."

"Most institutions prefer excess they can photograph," Nera said.

Depth swallowed. "The food vessels are correct."

The liaison brightened. "I can tell catering we got one thing right."

"Do not tell them Seliath praised the garnish."

"There isn't any garnish."

"Then the statement's still accurate."

They tested the joined surface first under separate weights, then two bodies, then all three. Bridge found a pressure ridge and opened the seam with a sound like cloth tearing underwater. Edge proposed surviving it for one night. Depth pressed harder against the defect until the map reddened. After a brief exchange, Bridge reached for the sealant again.

The liaison sat through the reopened work he had hoped was finished. "Does every disagreement need contact?"

"No," Bridge said. "Some require food. Some require time. Some require one voice to discover that it has become annoying."

Edge did not look up. "Bridge has discovered this repeatedly."

Depth's body produced a pulse along the contact tissue. The translator labeled it NONLEXICAL SOCIAL SIGNAL and declined further courage.

By the time the surface qualified under all three bodies, the visitors' departure window had already begun. Trope asked what distance protected sleep privacy and maintained cover over the clustered bodies.

"Bracken may hold the outer corridor," Bridge said through the thinning channel. "Witness House may retain passive threshold records. No visitor, protector, or machine crosses the interior line unless the agreed emergency signs appear."

Nera documented the boundary, the signs, the authorities, and the prohibition on inferred exchange. Mills acknowledged outer-corridor duty from the observation post and left the interior feed closed.

The three bodies gathered on the repaired surface beside the old module wall. Edge touched Depth along one flank. Bridge circled twice before folding against both, then rose again so Depth could shift pressure from the patched shoulder. The conductor status advanced from amber to steady green. Their breathing slowed at different rates.

Trope and Nera withdrew. The door locked along the interior line. Outside it, Bracken's protection display mapped three body-local markers onto one green sleep-state field.

Behind the door, Edge shifted. Bridge rose without fully waking, waited for Depth's patched shoulder to settle, and folded down again.

. . .

The sky closed while Mara was arguing that an emergency exception could not belong to the person most eager to use it.

"If Rook can suspend my exposure limit because Rook needs the work," she said, "then what I have is not a limit. It is a flattering suggestion written by people who expect my lungs to be patriotic."

Across the engineering bay, Rook hunched over a forgotten cup while Mara stabbed at six separate fields on the emergency form. Consent. Command. Qualification. Exposure ceiling. Replacement. Abort authority. The interface kept trying to collapse them under PERMISSION, and every time it did, Mara opened them again.

"The exception belongs to command because the operational consequence belongs to command," Rook said.

"Only one consequence. My body remains aggressively decentralized."

"The record says you may refuse."

"The record also says refusal cannot later become evidence that my claim is fraudulent, my competence unstable, or my access inconvenient."

"It says that because you made us say it."

"Good. Write down which part of the consequence you plan to breathe for me."

Mills lowered his cup before it made a sound. Nera reviewed the protocol. Depth rested beside Mara's console while Bridge operated the translation field. In the Tahl habitat, Edge watched the exterior and supervised the

sleep-surface cure that procurement had accidentally turned into constitutional law.

Rook rubbed one thumb over the rim of his cup. "I don't want authority to become bodily immunity. I also don't want every emergency to end with command begging the only qualified person as though the station were a sentimental hostage."

Mara folded her arms. "Then train another person."

"We are."

"When?"

"Before the next emergency, if the plan survives contact with this one."

"That is a very popular year."

The warning tone cut across his answer.

It sounded first through the wall, then from every authorized device in the bay. CLOSED SKY. FORTY-THREE MINUTES TO SHELTER CONFIGURATION. The confidence band beneath the forecast widened while Trope read it. A coronal particle front had struck Khepri through Cairn's charged dust environment. Radiation climbed. Sensor noise thickened. Micron-scale debris now carried enough velocity to turn ordinary station hardware into shrapnel.

Rook set down the cup. "Pell, shelter authority. Mills, clear every route the shutters need. Nera, duplicate event provenance off local power. Mara, review suspended."

Mara had already dismissed the console. "That one was easy."

No one ran. The station reconfigured in hard stages: radiators folded behind armor, shutters dropped, approach lanes vanished, and small craft locked to their berths. The next Bracken window sat where orbital geometry had fixed it.

Trope and Mills secured loose frames while Pell assigned shelter sectors by heat load, respiration, and function. Depth and Bridge accepted an interior location without surrendering person-level authority to the body labels on the map. The Tahl habitat transmitted Edge's acknowledgement with twelve seconds of delay, then twenty-one, then not at all.

The blowers climbed in pitch.

Trope felt the change through her boots before the environmental display admitted it. Air reached the back of her throat warmer and wetter. Somewhere behind the west service wall, a thin tearing sound ended in three quick valve closures.

Mara was at the life-support stack before the alarm named the component. "Old cassette."

The access panel released a breath of damp heat. A molecular-exchange membrane had peeled from its support edge and shed gray-white fragments into two adjacent channels. The stack had isolated itself, but carbon-dioxide removal fell with it. Condensate recovery stuttered. A bead of water formed beside Trope's hand and slid down the metal as if the machine had begun to sweat.

Pell recalculated the reserve twice. "Twenty-one hours to command threshold under conservation."

"Next gate?" Mills asked.

"Not inside that clock."

Mara held a sample strip beneath the bench reader. "Human reserve area buys minimum exchange. It does not buy enough."

The shelter order deepened. Lights dimmed, fabrication stopped, and measured cups replaced open dispensers. A family passed in filter masks, one parent carrying a sleeping child and the other a medicine box that could not warm. Nobody knew their names. Their breath moved the same clock.

Two technicians who had worked the previous maintenance shift were ordered into rest hammocks despite insisting they could still hold tools. Pell assigned labor in twenty-minute blocks and rest in forty, except where a named operation could not survive interruption. He refused three volunteers whose chief qualification was terror within reach of equipment.

Depth compressed closer to the floor. Bridge adopted a different breathing pattern while the translator marked the adjustment body-local and voluntary. The human system measured the reduced oxygen demand. The mechanism of choice remained Seliath's.

An operations officer at Pell's shoulder said, "We can tell the Tahl visitors we've entered conservation posture. We don't need to provide cassette layout, reserve inventory, or failure interval."

"They are inside the interval," Trope said.

"They are also claimants with an active technical service. If we expose stack arrangement, they infer reserve doctrine. If we expose reserve doctrine, they infer what failures we fear. Their bodies are affected. Their military does not therefore acquire our whole station."

"Nobody proposed whole-station disclosure," Nera said.

"I am proposing that panic is also a material risk."

Depth and Bridge had neither asked to leave, demanded access, nor raised a voice. "Then do not manufacture panic in advance and call the result theirs," Trope said.

Marr joined from Platform One through a channel degraded enough to roughen every consonant. "The officer is not wrong. Any disclosure package will become evidence that a human Witness installation required Tahl assistance under pressure."

Rook checked the air clock. "Any concealment package will become evidence that we lied to invited occupants about how long their atmosphere could support life."

"Scope it," Marr said. "Don't hand them maintenance topology because honesty has acquired dramatic lighting."

The first debris strike made a sound no larger than a fingernail against glass. A second strike followed farther down the hull, and the shelter wall showed what that smallness carried at orbital speed.

Rook posted the decision on the wall. "Affected occupants receive failure class, measured trend, safe-air interval, and interfaces relevant to repair or departure. Military geometry, reserve placement, unrelated routes, and nonessential design remain protected. Decision owner: Rook."

Bridge spoke before Nera finished rendering the package into the Tahl channel. "Seliath had already observed rising carbon dioxide, displaced condensation, altered blower harmonics, and heat reallocation."

Depth's cadence was slower. "Seliath had not observed the delamination, reserve shortage, or twenty-one-hour threshold. Those facts come from disclosure."

Nera recorded the distinction before anyone could praise the Tahl for knowing what humans had just told them.

Bridge extended a fine forelimb toward the mobile environmental case beside the plinth. "Seliath carries one folded reserve sheet of silicate-protein exchange lamina. It is intended for body-near environmental repair. Seliath offers a limited portion for emergency testing and use."

Pell asked, "On what terms?"

"Voluntary contribution. No recognition of title. No enforceable claim debt. No submission. No unrestricted design transfer. Emergency adaptation and necessary reproduction only. Attribution remains."

Marr's answer broke through a wash of static. "Propaganda."

"Yes," Bridge said.

The bay went still around the unsoftened agreement.

"If the material succeeds," Bridge added, "Seliath will later argue that Tahl presence at Palisade saved human life. The argument will be true."

Marr said, "You could have wrapped that in humanitarian language."

"Seliath assumed you would unwrap it."

Rook measured the lamina case against the safe-air clock. "We accept testing under the stated terms, subject to contamination control, performance verification, and station abort authority."

Depth said, "Add that failure will not be described as Tahl sabotage without evidence."

"Add that success will not settle title," Marr said.

"Both," Rook said.

Nera wrote while they fought over verbs, deleting any word that smuggled title into aid or gratitude into debt. The air clock dropped another minute before all sides could point to the same instrument and know what they had agreed to risk.

The lamina unfolded beneath a sterile hood in pale mineral pleats, dry but sheened like wet stone, thin enough to transmit the shadow of Mara's fingers hovering above it. The Tahl design record identified layers by function but withheld manufacturing sequence beyond what emergency reproduction required. Depth supplied thermal limits. Bridge supplied custody terms. Edge remained beyond reliable contact.

Mara leaned close to the hood. "It is beautiful."

Bridge said, "That statement creates no rights."

"I know. I've admired several things and left their borders intact."

Mills set a sterilized tool case beside her. "Name three."

"Your continued survival. This wrench. Silence."

"Hostile list."

The testing team worked down the bench: microbes, reactive chemistry, pressure, exchange, failure. Nera sealed every shaving and swab. The first strip died under a clamp made for human polymer; its serrated jaw bit through one mineral pleat before the load cell noticed. Mara froze the bench, left the ruined strip under the camera, and made everyone look at what their tool had assumed.

Depth examined the cut. "The tool assumed a material that resists by thickness."

"The tool is proud of its upbringing," Mara said.

Sterilization reduced performance but did not destroy it. The lamina exchanged carbon dioxide and water vapor. Testing detected no viable transfer, unstable residue, or reactive chemistry inside the declared emergency threshold. The first chamber run produced a result so favorable that Mara ordered a known control leak introduced before accepting it. The leak registered. The performance was real.

Then Mara tensioned the sheet inside a human cassette frame and it bowed inward until one edge whitened.

"Stop."

Pressure fell. Mara rested two fingers on the steel, not the lamina. "Material is fine. Our support geometry is trying to turn it into ours."

Depth edged closer. "The lamina normally distributes load across a pleated mineral lattice."

Mara slapped the wrong bed frame. "We have a flat steel rectangle. A proud cultural achievement."

She salvaged an undamaged frame and two seals from the failed stack. A fabrication specialist laid down a compliant support mesh while Mara corrected the attachment spacing against measured stretch. Trope braced the frame upright. Mills carried the manifold parts before Mara could decide lifting them herself would save fourteen seconds.

"Do not hover," Mara told him.

"I'm not hovering. I'm enforcing gravity."

"You've made gravity louder."

The station grew wetter as the repair advanced. Condensation gathered beneath shutter housings. Shirts darkened between shoulder blades. Pell reduced the active bay to essential personnel and sent everyone else into low-exertion shelter. One technician slept in a wall hammock three meters from the workbench, boots still fastened, while another counted the air clock in silence.

Across the first pressure plateau, the hybrid cassette stayed stable. At the second, its support mesh crept half a millimeter along one corner.

Mara swore and reached toward the hot frame.

Her designated backup caught her wrist and left the decision hers. "Exposure limit."

"I can finish the corner."

"You wrote the limit."

A tendon moved once in Mara's jaw. Then she stepped back. "Two attachment points inward. Lower tension. Repeat from plateau one. You own the hands."

The specialist moved the attachment points inward and lowered the tension. Mara stood behind the exposure line with both hands locked beneath her arms, giving directions while somebody else held the tool. The protocol had finally reached the only moment that mattered: the moment she knew she could do it faster herself.

A warning populated Nera's display.

The Tahl mobile exchange buffer had exceeded its thermal trend. Depth and Bridge had reduced synchronization, translation detail, and memory-index work, yet heat continued to rise. The ordinary link to Edge had dissolved into unauthenticated fragments.

Nera transmitted only power, timing, and temperature metadata to Trope. The encrypted content appeared as a black field with a valid owner and no human inspection right.

Trope addressed Bridge. "Is Seliath's continuity equipment in danger?"

Bridge did not answer at once.

Depth sank lower against the floor. "Yes."

"Why wasn't that disclosed?"

"The station air threatened every occupant," Bridge said. "Seliath chose not to interrupt the membrane test before the first stable plateau."

Rook's expression hardened. "You demanded material risk from us while withholding your own."

"Seliath demanded truthful risk affecting its body and choices. It failed to apply the same rule when human choices affected Seliath."

Marr said, "At least hypocrisy translates."

Trope kept her eyes on Bridge. "No. It requires local adaptation."

Nera's glance met hers for one instant, then returned to the record.

Pell identified a shielded archival thermal buffer designed to preserve damaged evidence media through fire and radiation. Mara, still behind her exposure boundary, identified a sterile medical circulation loop that could cool the Tahl unit across a barrier while the fluids stayed separate.

The loop belonged to the civilian clinic. Five medication caskets depended on it while the fixed system labored under storm load. Ila Renn, the clinic lead, answered from a corridor crowded with battery carts, shouted temperatures, and one child asking the same frightened question nobody had time to answer properly.

"If you take it," she said, "my people rotate the caskets manually. One stable infusion moves to tomorrow. The family carrying the insulated box gets a second cold-pack watch instead of sleep."

Pell reviewed the clinic thresholds. "Can the medicines remain safe?"

"With two more workers and every battery cart you have."

Rook opened the allocation field. "Six-hour diversion. Clinic priority on staff, carts, and first replacement. Automatic return if any casket crosses amber. Decision owner: Rook."

Ila's reply came without deference. "I understand why you're doing it. I still object to your visitor's continuity becoming my clinic's night."

"Record the objection."

"Recording it will not cool the boxes."

Rook left the allocation field open. "No. It will keep me from calling the cost mutual."

Bridge lowered its body until both front limbs touched the floor. "Seliath accepts the objection."

Ila said, "Acceptance is not a worker."

"No."

"Then send me two."

Mills was already pulling up the staff board. "You get four when the frame is seated."

"Two who can read a temperature strip."

"I can lower it to three."

"Send four."

The channel closed before anyone could describe the exchange as reconciliation.

Nera specified isolated power, timing, and storage. The human archive could confirm temperature, checksums, write protection, and successful storage; payload content remained beyond decryption, query, or alteration.

Rook spoke the offer through Seliath's record structure. "Voluntary emergency support. No recognition of human title. No enforceable debt. No access to memory content. No ownership of preserved state. No later inspection right created by acceptance."

Bridge examined the interface. "Your archive normally verifies stored evidence by reading structure."

"Not this time," Nera said. She disabled every parser above block integrity and displayed the resulting permissions. The human side could receive an encrypted block, preserve order, return a checksum, and prove write protection. It could not identify whether the block encoded a memory index, a medical state, a commitment record, or nonsense.

"How does Seliath know you did not preserve a second readable path?" Bridge asked.

"You do not know from my promise," Nera said. "You know from isolated hardware, the permissions record, your own test payload, and the fact that Pell will open the physical interface before connection."

Pell unsealed the casing and stepped away. Trust was not requested where inspection could carry the weight.

Depth and Bridge touched along shoulder and flank. The private indicator lit. Edge remained absent beyond the storm. The waiting cost the station nothing it could lawfully demand back.

Bridge returned to the translator. "Seliath accepts at person level. Human support enters the political record. Its utility and its politics travel together."

"Agreed," Rook said.

The two repairs occupied the same bay without becoming the same gift. Mara called the membrane sequence. Pell guarded custody. Seliath set the

lamina and continuity limits. Nera kept each act attached to its actor while Trope and Mills braced the cassette, shifted the archive unit, and cleared the route whenever the hull rang.

A debris strike reverberated through the station. Trope had both hands on the frame when it hit. The cassette kicked against her palms. Mills caught the lower weight. The fabrication specialist seated the last seal while Mara recited the torque sequence.

Across the bay, the medical loop circulated. Human coolant moved through one side of the sterile exchanger. Tahl heat crossed the barrier without Tahl fluid, data, or memory following it. The archival buffer ingested encrypted, write-protected state blocks and issued only integrity confirmation.

Rook authorized reduced flow through the hybrid cassette.

The lamina drew inward against the compliant mesh. Pressure rose in stages. One seal trembled, steadied, and did not reopen. Control software compared actual selectivity and deformation against the test curve instead of forcing the material to imitate a human membrane.

At sixty percent load, the manifold reported a pressure oscillation the frame sensors did not confirm. Mara ordered flow cut. The fabrication specialist proposed replacing the sensor. Depth asked whether the oscillation matched the lamina pleats settling against the mesh. It did. Mara revised the filter only after Nera preserved the raw disagreement, the explanation, and the authority for the change.

"If you smooth that without the original," Nera said, "tomorrow it becomes a perfect machine that never existed."

"Tomorrow may expose the ugly graph," Mara said.

"Minimum carbon-dioxide removal in thirty seconds," Pell said.

"Do not predict success before the instrument does."

The number exceeded the survival threshold.

Mills read the lower-brace field twice before checking the hardware. Mara called for the next reading before threshold could become triumph. The blower pitch changed by a narrow interval Trope could hear because she had spent the last hours listening to it fail. Water recovery resumed in uneven pulses. Condensation stopped spreading beneath the nearest shutter housing. The safe-air clock extended, recalculated, and extended again.

On Nera's other display, the exchange-buffer temperature fell below damage threshold. Timing stabilized. Shielded storage wrote new encrypted blocks with valid checksums. The machine preserved what it could not parse.

Closed sky peaked. Debris ticked against the armor in irregular clusters. Heat pooled behind the folded radiators. The hybrid cassette completed one full-load cycle, then another. The lamina did not tear. The mesh did not migrate. The Tahl buffer maintained a temperature low enough to preserve delayed integration with Edge without pretending the separation had ended.

After the third stable cycle, Marr said, "The material performed."

Bridge said, "The human adaptation performed."

"Neither settles Palisade."

"Neither settles Palisade," Bridge agreed.

The first authenticated signal from Edge arrived as a damaged packet containing identity, timing, and a narrow integrity confirmation. Depth made a sound below the translator's range. Bridge sent only acknowledgement. Full exchange required bandwidth that would not corrupt the reunion it attempted.

Rook eased the strictest movement restrictions. External transit remained prohibited. Pell assigned inspection, replacement planning, and reintegration support to personnel with authority to do them. The technician in the wall hammock slept through the announcement.

Measured water and ration bars arrived with mineral packets warmed to Tahl body temperature. Mills called the bar an insult to grain. Mara said grain had survived worse institutions.

Bridge permitted the record to state that Seliath accepted nourishment, but rejected communal supper. "Shared emergency refueling" came closer.

Depth judged the mineral balance correct and the texture punitive. A brief satisfaction crossed the attendant who had carried unwanted trays through the storm, then vanished.

They ate because bodies required it. Ila's clinic was still rotating medicine by hand; Edge remained beyond full exchange; Mara's exposure clock continued to count. Marr ate standing, eyes moving between the green redundancy field and the custody terms still open beside it.

Mills sent workers and battery carts to the clinic. The receiving-room liaison passed through carrying temperature strips, his uniform coat gone. He told Bridge the corrected item was filed as one contact surface, with any present voice able to receive notice and no sovereign body designation.

"Accepted," Bridge said.

He tried not to turn the word into a new administrative error.

Edge's damaged signal pulsed once.

Nera and Pell archived the lamina, human frame, software adaptation, cooling loop, timing, shielding, and storage as separate objects whose histories met in one emergency. Down in the clinic, the medicine stayed safe and the infusion window still passed.

SUPPORT SUCCESSFUL. CLINIC BURDEN UNRESOLVED.

Rook signed beneath it.

Under Palisade's gray, the blower held its new pitch through the floor. Down in the clinic, four workers rotated medication caskets by hand while the replacement loop remained hours away.

The status field stayed gray. Witness station breathed.

CHAPTER 7

The Nearest Body

Condensation ran from two medicine caskets and gathered against the airlock drain. The clinic runner shifted them each time a radiator technician dragged an untrusted hinge through the same narrow patch of floor. At the clamp, a service pilot watched cargo billing climb while the vacuum supervisor counted down the window.

Only Trope and Nera would go outside. The first exterior clearance after closed sky still belonged to all six schedules.

Rook authorized one inspection, three nodes, and no unscheduled heroism. Trope and Nera stood in open suits while Nera checked Trope's shoulder seal and made her say the contact rules aloud. In an emergency, move first if delay threatened life. Otherwise name the place, the purpose, the motion, and where it ended. Permission traveled only as far as the act described.

"If you stop answering?" Nera asked.

"Use the medical rule. Not the romantic one."

Several people discovered sudden interest in equipment. Nera confirmed preflight had not erased the distinction.

The outer hatch opened onto Khepri, vast enough to look like the condition under which smaller things existed, with Cairn dark against its edge. Station structures and residual particles shone in hard pieces. Trope saw all of it while it was present. Later she would retain measurements, order, pressure, and where Nera had been. She would not be able to summon the view and stand inside it again.

Three neutral nodes formed a loose triangle around a moving address defined only by relation. The service pilot asked whether they expected to find the null.

"We expect the measurements to leave an empty relation where the model says it should be," Nera said.

"So perhaps."

Nera glanced at the billing clock on the pilot's wrist. "Perhaps, with error bars and someone whose name goes on the decision."

Trope pushed from the station. Nera followed. Their tether carried enough slack for independent control.

The first node had taken a strike across its optical baffle and placed Khepri several arc seconds from the planet Trope could see.

"Khepri has declined the correction," Trope said.

Nera archived the wrong state before opening the housing. A fragment struck her wrist, debris crossed the node, and Trope pulled her behind the baffle by the emergency tether. Their suits collided for less than a second.

"That contact didn't require a question," Nera said after checking both seals. "I'm not thanking you into broader permission."

"Good."

They repaired the baffle, but Nera kept the damaged reading beside the correction. Anyone using the final number would have to pass the old error on the way to it.

Radiation history had left the second node's clock drifting smoothly away from station time although its body looked intact. Trope repeated physical ranging. Position could not explain it. Nera fitted offset and drift only after a third measurement and preserved local and corrected time separately.

As the vacuum window shrank, the radiator supervisor's eleven minutes and the clinic family's lost sleep entered the same countdown.

The third node had moved in a way the provisional model had rounded into stillness. Trope reconstructed its actual translation and rotation while Nera removed the false hold assumption. Their correction preserved travel rather than rewriting the node as if it had always occupied the repaired position.

The three nodes still disagreed, but now each disagreement had a body: damaged glass, a drifting clock, motion the model had rounded away. With those histories left visible, the lattice could use them together.

Nera said, "You added two nouns."

"They are load-bearing nouns."

Nera opened the address law between them. Khepri was primary. The companion had to persist, carry measurable mass, move predictably, and exceed the minimum scale. Dust could pass closer; a tug could cut across the line; debris could win ordinary distance for a second. None of it captured the address because the rule was looking for a qualifying companion, not the nearest scrap in space.

"The class prevents transients from interrupting the address," Nera said. "It also lets us find the person who chose the class."

"First flag does that."

"Yes."

"Claimant. Valid resident. Target."

Nera's breath sounded once through the channel. "Gravity did not author those."

"No." Trope pulsed into the test volume and watched the track slide, then settle as their suits matched it. "But people still act as though the selected relation contains the whole thing."

The maintenance supervisor interrupted. "I dislike philosophy less than I dislike losing a thermal window, but I have eleven minutes."

"You were not included in the philosophy," Trope said.

"I've been waiting outside it for forty-seven."

Nera sent a provisional status. "Three-node agreement restored. Sustained test incomplete. Radiator team may enter the near service envelope if Rook accepts the remaining risk. Tug warrant remains inactive."

Rook answered before the supervisor could. “Radiator team authorized under local exclusion. Tug remains detained. Decision owner: Rook.”

The technicians inside the airlock closed their helmets. The pilot stayed seated on the equipment case. One measurement had released two bodies and pinned a third in place.

Trope and Nera pulsed into the test volume. For four minutes, each suit had to hold independent position while the lattice separated predicted field residual from suit thrust, particle strikes, and node noise. The moving null track swept near them, a relation rather than a place either could occupy.

A correction nudged Trope’s sensor mast outside alignment tolerance. The tether took a shallow line of tension.

Nera asked, “May I take your left shoulder ring, rotate you eight degrees sunward, hold through instrument lock, and release?”

“Yes. Left shoulder ring, eight degrees, through lock.”

Nera crossed the gap under one controlled pulse. Her glove closed around the ring. Force entered Trope’s suit through the shoulder frame and turned her slowly toward the instrument line. Their faceplates drew close enough that Nera’s eyes appeared larger behind the curved glass, then smaller when her focus shifted to the alignment mark. Khepri’s bands moved across both visors. Trope’s breath climbed too high in her chest for the work being done.

“Six degrees,” Nera said.

The repaired instrument registered seven point four. “Seven point four.”

“You’re difficult to rotate.”

“I have institutional mass.”

Nera’s mouth started toward a smile and stopped at the lock.

The indicator turned green.

She released at once and fired backward until the tether curved slack between them. “Contact ended. Was it acceptable?”

Trope checked the shoulder telemetry. It answered the medical question and nothing else. “The suit was fine.”

Nera waited.

The residual timer spent another second. “The rest was also fine,” Trope said.

“Fine in the medical sense?”

“No.”

“Fine in the romantic sense?”

“That category has poor calibration.”

Nera’s laugh arrived as a single breath against her microphone, gone almost before the suit channel transmitted it. “Then use your own terms.”

The slack tether hung between them. “I liked that you asked. I liked the contact,” Trope said.

“Thank you for saying the second sentence.”

“It was technically the third.”

“I’m revising the count under my own authority.”

The residual timer ran. Their work now depended on stillness, which made speech feel more capable of damage than movement.

Nera tracked Khepri and Cairn through the visor overlay. "May I ask one personal question about aphantasia?"

"One. Here."

"When we go inside, can you see this again?"

Trope framed the planet, the moon, the repaired nodes, the station lights, and Nera's suit several meters away. The scene existed with unbearable clarity because it had not yet become memory.

"No," she said. "I'll keep your voice, the pressure at my shoulder, the order of the work, and where you were. The view stays in the file."

Nera said nothing.

The uncertainty envelope approached. Nera stayed silent long enough that Trope stopped watching the timer and watched her instead.

"You are sorry," Trope said.

Nera brought her visor square to Trope's. "No."

"You stopped speaking in the shape people use when they are sorry for me."

"I stopped because I was deciding whether my next question was curiosity or appetite."

Trope had no immediate reply.

Nera added. "I can see this again. I can also see things I'd rather not. The last time I saw my father, he was standing beneath a station advertisement with one sleeve rolled higher than the other. I've forgotten most of the conversation. The sleeve remains available whenever it pleases. I didn't want to set that opposite your absence as though one of us got the better machinery."

The moving null passed within the inner band of their display.

"Absent things become facts for me," Trope said.

Nera checked the remaining test time. "One update. Then I ask nothing else."

The lattice rolled through a full measurement.

Nera asked, "Do absent people become facts too?"

Trope's first answer arrived ready and insufficient. Names. Habits. Schedules. Phrases. The direction someone usually turned at a corridor fork. The exact delay before Mills admitted he was worried. Della's hand placed near hers rather than on it. Nera's way of asking permission while leaving refusal free of gratitude. Consequences survived departure. None of them could look back.

"Yes," Trope said. "But not only facts."

"What else?"

"Interrupted expectation."

Nera waited.

"If I expect an answer and none comes, the gap is present as a failure in the pattern. If someone should occupy a place and does not, the place is wrong. I do not need a picture to miss what should answer back."

"Is that enough to keep a person present?"

Trope's hands hovered over the suit controls. "No."

The timer used another second. Nera did not rescue the word.

The tether drifted slack between them. “Facts cannot answer. They can tell me whom to ask, what I promised, what I should expect, and what I have no right to assume. They can tell me that an absence matters. They cannot become the person.”

“And when I am absent?”

The timer showed thirty-eight seconds.

Trope knew Nera’s work cadence, her late anger when an institution made a derived record look original, the black paint worn from the edge of one thumbnail, the way she read faces for information Trope often derived elsewhere. None of that was Nera. All of it pointed away from the facts and back toward the living source.

“You remain someone I have to ask,” Trope said.

Nera dipped her head. “That is not nothing.”

“No.”

The sustained test completed.

Measured acceleration remained inside the corrected provisional envelope. Trope verified hazard geometry and suit state. Nera committed the performance, residuals, conditions, and separate authorship of each repair. The lattice had found no body at the null, exactly what an address made of relation predicted.

Rook assigned the radiator technicians the next bounded exterior slot. Their supervisor said nothing ceremonial. He said, “Finally,” and rolled the hinge assembly into the airlock queue.

The service pilot’s departure warrant stayed red pending a later traffic review. She lifted her wrist toward the interior camera.

“Your null has liberated two technicians and detained one scrubber shipment,” she said. “Please include its political development in the report.”

Nera answered, “The report will identify which decision did each.”

“That wasn’t a joke.”

“Neither was the answer.”

They used the final ninety seconds already written into the EVA plan.

“The null is an address,” Nera said. “Declared bodies, measured relation, qualification rule, accountable authority.”

“The selected relation is true,” Trope said. “It does not contain either body.”

Khepri exceeded primary. Cairn exceeded nearest qualifying companion. Nera exceeded the facts Trope could preserve about her. Trope left the last sentence intact.

The return tone sounded.

They moved back toward Witness station on separate vectors. Their tether hung slack between them. Behind them, three repaired witnesses measured a privileged relation no body could occupy for long.

By the time Trope’s helmet came off, the radiator crew was outside. The clinic runner was arguing with a logistics clerk about who possessed authority to return a loop everyone agreed belonged in the clinic. The clerk wanted an equipment-release signature from Seliath’s receiving authority.

The runner wanted the machine, four charged carts, and somebody who could lift the rear frame without touching the sterile coupler.

"Seliath is two bodies in recovery and one body outside," the runner said. "Which signature do you recommend?"

The clerk looked at the cooling loop, then at the speaker, as though serial numbers had been invented because persons refused to stay inside a single field.

Bridge's receiving voice arrived over the wall speaker. "Seliath releases human cooling support. The clinic has first return claim under the recorded diversion."

The clerk checked the runner's live field. "That's the signature."

"That's a voice."

"The system accepts it."

"The system also accepted three beds."

The clerk closed his eyes. "Please take the loop before I become a philosophical object."

Four workers lifted it onto the clinic cart. The runner checked each seal herself. As she passed Trope, she said, "The family missed the infusion window. The medicine stayed safe."

"I know."

"I know you know." She tucked the foil blanket more firmly into her collar. "I needed the sentence to arrive in this room too."

Then she followed the loop toward the lift.

Nera had been summoned to chronology support before she finished unsealing her gloves. Mills appeared with two cups of coffee and a ration square broken into unequal halves. He offered Trope the larger half, examined the face she made, and switched them.

"The smaller piece contains less betrayal," he said.

"The grain remains equally insulted."

"It might've been a legume."

"That makes the custody problem worse."

They carried the coffee to the Cairnward service shadow, where Trope's next duty had already acquired a chair, a coffee ring, and three overlapping jurisdictions.

The chair belonged to Witness House. The coffee ring belonged to the Ninth Precision Observation Detachment and had survived two cleaning protocols through strength of claim. The view belonged to whichever authority believed it could define a border through space by drawing first. A strip of yellow repair cloth covered the seam where closed-sky heat had warped the blister frame. Each station correction drew the cloth in and released it again, a small mechanical breath.

Trope took the chair because Mills had lost the argument about whose knees were older. He hooked one hand through the rail behind her and ate the ration square while charged dust scratched white flecks across the passive feeds.

Beyond the glass, Palisade's platforms moved through hard Khepri light. The released radiator crew crawled along a distant boom, suit lamps

blinking in pairs. Below them, the service tug remained clamped with scrubber canisters in its rack. Its pilot had progressed from irritation to stillness, which was a more dangerous state in people who billed by the hour.

Nera pinned the corrected null-lattice chronology to the observation stack from a room deeper inside Witness. Three residual bands stayed apart, refusing the common courtesy of pretending that repaired instruments had always agreed.

Mills bet against the empty corridor. "Ten credits says the next thing through there is trash."

"Whose trash?"

"That's how I know the chair has made you cruel. You operationalized trash."

A thermal return appeared between Platform One's radiator occlusion and the Tahl body-near exclusion zone.

Mills stopped with food between his teeth.

The return vanished behind trusswork, emerged with four load-bearing contacts, and moved forward under power. No full outline persisted for more than half a second. The body used the debris shelter that had already been shown to delay human identification and human fire.

Alectan fusion supplied continuity before the optics did.

ADULT MALE TAHL COMBATANT.

PROBABLE EMITTER WEAPON.

HOSTILE APPROACH.

The confidence bar climbed into amber. Platform One's defensive mount left weather posture and entered its slow traverse. A solution request opened on Trope's rifle display before she asked for one. The exterior radiator crew received an automatic shelter order and moved toward the nearest hard recess. The service tug's inactive warrant acquired a red defense hold.

"Male contributed," Mills said.

Trope opened the field lineage. Estimated mass. Stance width. Armor burden. Human combat-posture prior. The Tahl translation cell beside the result was blank.

She disabled the sex field in her local reconstruction. Combatant confidence fell six points, below the threshold that had triggered the mount traverse and the worker shelter order. The powered package was still a probable weapon. The route was dangerous. The body was Tahl. Six points had not created innocence. They had helped create permission.

"Six points of an anatomy nobody observed," Mills said.

"An anatomy the table assumed."

"And then armed."

Nera entered from chronology support. "Authenticated recovery notice in custody queue four. Seliath. Edge voice. Cairnward Passive Package C-4. Service lock three. Declared stand-off marker."

"Attached to the track?" Trope asked.

"No. Witness logged it. Tactical fusion did not query the queue."

A broken transmission reached the service band. The translator caught enough.

"Edge voice of Seliath. Carrying Witness property. Route declared. Your display calls this body male. Correct it."

The body disappeared behind the truss.

Mills pulled the passive-radar pane nearer. "The affected party has joined the classification review."

Trope opened the observation channel. "Edge, Bracken observation receives you. Maintain declared route and stand-off. Do not illuminate Platform One."

"Diagnostic pulse only," Edge replied through static. "Package damaged. I will rotate it away when geometry permits."

Tactical fusion labeled the transmission UNVERIFIED CLAIM BY HOSTILE CONTACT.

None of this made the approach safe. Edge was inside a corridor already proved capable of breaking identification into fragments. The package had power, a boom resembling an emitter, and enough stored energy to hurt something if its failure became violent. The route would expose Platform One before the heavy mount finished traversing. Witness recovery would not reach the stand-off marker before the last clean precision shot closed.

Years earlier, a brace had looked like a weapon until a real attacker appeared behind it. Nothing waited behind Edge now to simplify the choice. There was one living claimant, one suspicious machine, and no promise that restraint would become wisdom after the fact.

Trope removed the fused border. Three passive tracks replaced one red body. She aligned optical fragments with thermal return, low-power radar, package orientation, route history, and Mills's calls.

"Gait."

"Burdened," Mills said. "Load transfers before each turn. Two fine hands under the long member. Rear contacts taking debris and station correction."

"Weapon presentation?"

"Not stable. Could be careful carriage. Could be careful carriage of a weapon."

The package pulsed. Eleven seconds. Eleven again. Then nothing. When the pulse returned, its amplitude had fallen.

Nera said, "C-4 alignment self-tests have skipped since closed sky. Same interval."

"Other modes?" Mills asked.

"Power, low radar, passive optics, storage, broken boom. I am recognizing the cough, not certifying the patient."

Edge emerged from occlusion farther left than fusion predicted. The route bent toward Witness service lock three. The package rode low. No acceleration. No dwell on Platform One. No deployment.

Trope rebuilt the object aloud so nobody listening could hide inside the red border.

"Living Tahl body. Edge identity authenticated through a separate custody notice. Powered equipment, probably C-4. Dangerous route. Intent unknown. Combatant is derived. Male is invented."

An Alectan fire-control operator answered. His voice was young, tired, and careful. "Adult and male are supporting morphology descriptors. They do not establish engagement by themselves."

"They increase the score," Nera said.

"They refine the stance prior."

"With a category the morphology table cannot translate."

The operator did not answer at once. "The model still has mass, burden, route, and posture."

"Then let those fields testify under their own names," Trope said.

"Shot line in nineteen seconds," Mills said.

Platform One acquired first. A green solution marker narrowed around Edge's center mass. Trope's system calculated a lower-collateral line through the outer locomotor ring, enough to stop movement while holding the package clear of either habitat. Capability was clear. Judgment remained unfinished.

Marr joined joint coordination. Platform One's status listed thirty-two people inside the exposed defense volume, six still in pressure suits from closed-sky repairs. The radiator technicians had flattened themselves into a recess not designed for both their bodies and the hinge assembly. He needed no invented civilians. The route already contained people who would pay for a bad hold.

"Sergeant," Marr said, "you have a Tahl body in a known blind corridor carrying a powered emitter assembly toward Platform One. The recovery notice establishes what Seliath wants us to believe. It does not establish what the package can do."

"Agreed."

"The body selected the route that delays identification. Seliath has already used ambiguity for legal advantage. The platform loses its response window before Witness custody reaches the contact."

"Also agreed."

Mills gave her the smallest acknowledgment. Agreement deprived anger of an easy target.

Marr went on. "Alectan defense directs engagement on track Cairnward-Seven. Take the lower-collateral shot before final occlusion."

Command delivered a complete noun into Trope's ear. The display gave her body, weapon, sex, intent, and the relief of one red border. The rifle stock was warm from the blister heater. Her pulse traveled through the bone of her trigger hand like vibration from a bad pump.

"I do not have the ordered target," she said.

"You have the track."

"I have a Tahl body carrying disputed powered equipment through dangerous geometry. I do not have an established hostile combatant carrying an emitter weapon."

"What would satisfy you?"

"Attack acceleration. Weapon deployment. Hostile illumination. Stand-off violation."

The timer fell to twelve seconds.

Marr's control thinned at the edges. "You are assigning every unresolved fact to human risk. Seliath receives the benefit of uncertainty it helped create. Platform crews receive the consequences."

A technician remained stalled halfway across an exterior ladder. Trope could see the white suit fixed against black structure, one hand on a rung, waiting for people in sealed rooms to decide whether the approaching body was a person, a weapon, or both.

"I cannot rule out a threat," Trope said.

"That is not a refusal."

"No. This is. I will not fire on the target described because the target described is not established."

Rook entered the channel. "Trope, can you rule out a threat?"

"No, sir."

"Does the current evidence satisfy the engagement rule?"

"No, sir."

"Remaining hostile transitions?"

She repeated them. Rook asked Mills whether he concurred.

"I concur with the observations and the remaining risk," Mills said. "I do not have combatant intent."

Rook inhaled once. "Hold fire. My decision. Platform One maintains solution. Witness begins protective interception. Any attack acceleration, deployment, hostile illumination, or stand-off violation restores immediate engagement authority."

His authentication appeared beside the hold. The risk left Trope's trigger and appeared under Rook's name without becoming smaller.

Marr said, "You are protecting a claimant with human bodies."

Rook answered, "I am protecting the engagement rule with my name. Keep the mount live."

The last clean shot narrowed around Edge's locomotor ring.

Edge stepped from final occlusion.

The package lifted.

Trope took first pressure on the trigger.

Edge rotated the broken boom away from Platform One and both habitats, lowered C-4 onto its custody fixture, and aligned it with the declared marker.

The shot window closed.

For three seconds no one spoke. The technician on Platform One resumed climbing.

Pell entered on the Witness channel. "Recovery drone under my custody authorization. Edge, hold position. Human defense, the drone does not provide cover for movement."

"Understood," Edge said.

The drone crossed the boundary with shield plates locked. Its ordinary custody approach had been replaced by a combat-contact profile.

Manipulators retracted behind armor, and a recorded voice warned the approaching body against sudden movement every four seconds. Tactical fusion classified Edge as a combatant and appended ASSISTED DISARMAMENT, though Edge had extended the package voluntarily.

Trope read the verbs while the body held still.

Edge's forward limbs were narrower than the human reconstruction. Two ended in fine black manipulators around the fractured boom. Rear contacts spread under load against the station skin, each pad adjusting separately to gravity and correction. A pale membrane near the lower thorax flexed with breath. Nothing in the living body resembled a human man except the path through a table that had made the claim.

"Pell," Nera said, "preserve that object version."

"Sealed."

The drone clamped C-4 and isolated the bus. Edge released one manipulator at a time, waiting after each to see whether the boom would sag. When the final support came free, the drone drew the package away.

Scorched casing still carried custody marks. The internal identifier authenticated on the second scan.

Nera read the configuration. "Cairnward Passive Package C-4. Passive optics, low-power radar, timing core, environmental storage, fractured alignment boom. No attack package in the declared configuration."

Marr said, "Declared configuration accepted. My threshold objection remains."

"So does mine," Edge said.

With the package no longer shadowing the body, translation improved. Edge's voice was rougher than Bridge's and quicker than Depth's. Human systems repeatedly tried to hear sex in the pitch. The habit had survived the correction field.

"You called this body male," Edge said. "That false field increased combatant confidence. It unlocked a weapon solution. It renamed voluntary transfer assisted disarmament. Remove it from the record."

The fire-control operator replied. "The field's a morphology estimate, not a statement of personhood."

"It moved your gun."

The operator's next breath entered the channel. "Yes."

Edge waited.

"I thought of it as shorthand for a stance family," he said. "I didn't understand it had enough weight to cross the threshold."

Nera said, "The lineage showed six points."

"I can see that now."

"Could you see it before?"

"No. The operator view shows the aggregate."

Nobody had needed to hate Edge. Trope's gun had moved anyway.

Edge lowered its front section until all four supporting contacts shared the load. "This body has reproductive structures. They are not male. Seliath includes bodies with other structures and other phases. None makes Seliath a

human sex. Your system invented a category and treated the invention as evidence about what this body would do."

The operator said, "What descriptor should replace it?"

"Why must one?"

"For posture and load prediction."

"Then use posture and load."

He was silent.

Trope said, "Use the things you can see: mass distribution, contact count, joint range, carried burden, center shift."

Nera added, "And each can be wrong under its own name."

The operator said, "I can submit a field-separation request."

"Submit it," Edge said. "Do not describe the request as alien accommodation. Describe it as removing invented evidence from fire control."

"I will."

The radiator crew's shelter order expired when combatant confidence fell. Their supervisor requested restoration of the lost work interval. The labor-restoration workflow denied it automatically because the interruption was coded hostile-contact safety rather than model error. Trope forwarded the denial to Rook.

A false sex had already become missing repair time, a tug stopped at clamp, and a worker's body folded into a recess while the person carrying the field remained outside the lock.

Before Edge reached the habitat lock, command traffic was already naming the incident: disciplined refusal, alien favoritism, model hygiene, luck, compromise. Every phrase cut away whatever did not fit the speaker's preferred wound.

Pell moved C-4 into the evidence bay before anyone improved the story. Its scorched casing smelled of hot insulation. The broken boom tapped the cradle whenever the station corrected attitude.

Nera opened the raw state and preserved it before correcting the clock. The authenticated recovery notice matched Edge's route, package, stand-off, and custody procedure. Witness had logged it before tactical fusion classified the contact, but the shooter display did not load it until combatant confidence crossed threshold.

"Identity existed," Trope said.

"In another room," Nera replied. "Threat had a shorter hallway."

C-4's clock had drifted under radiation. The repaired null lattice supplied independent relation and preserved the original error. Six events appeared separately: package motion, Seliath's notice, unidentified acquisition, track formation, engagement threshold, and the display's FIRST DETECTED.

The last two shared a timestamp. A deterministic transformation had selected decision relevance and inserted it into a field whose ordinary meaning was physical observation.

Marr defended the need for one operational beginning. Nera told him to label it decision-relevant detection and preserve earlier receipt. Operators had needed Edge's notice before a gun moved.

The delayed service pilot arrived with a cushion under one arm and asked which clock owned her missed transfer invoice. Nera said they were finding out. The pilot preferred money. "So would most epistemology," Nera replied.

Nera pulled a small committed sample from Tahl service, medical, and maintenance records. Again and again, the body entered official time late, usually when classification or a work order made it useful. Comparable human records kept earliest observation and later significance apart. The sample could not prove intent or name an author. It was enough to strip NEUTRAL from the field description.

Rook ordered dual display of earliest warranted observation and selected operational threshold, preserved the active schema for audit, and required the sex-field separation request to describe removal of invented evidence rather than alien accommodation.

The clinic runner added a courier delay to a separately committed query, then made Pell sign that the cooling loop had come home late and safe.

A technician reached for cloth to quiet C-4's broken boom. Nera raised her hand. The tapping remained in the record.

Above the table, the claims-system rollover clock lit and counted down.

CHAPTER 8

A Record with No Author

The next claims-system rollover announced itself while C-4 was still strapped to the Witness evidence cradle.

Custody seals banded the package's scorched casing. One corner had fused into a black curl, and the alignment boom, broken cleanly near its second joint, tapped the cradle whenever Palisade corrected attitude. Trope had tried to quiet it with two folded restraint pads. Nera removed them before they touched the metal.

"A cleaner piece of evidence would be easier to trust," she said, "and easier to improve."

The boom tapped again.

Above the cradle, the rollover clock opened at forty-seven minutes. Two rows sat beside it: physical chronology above, later threat qualification below. Between them, pale blocks crossed the evidence wall, each carrying a certificate, a scope, and a checksum. Near the end of the chain, the author field was blank. The empty cell was smaller than Trope's hand.

Commander Iven Tal appeared on the secure display from Alectan records control. His collar was fastened too high for the heat in his room. When he leaned toward the camera, a strip of irritated skin showed where the fabric usually hid it. Behind him, two records clerks worked at separate consoles under emergency lamps. One had wrapped a station blanket around her shoulders. The other ate from a paper sleeve while reading a schema warning with the bleak concentration of a person being insulted by furniture.

"At rollover," Tal said, "Palisade access, defense, traffic, and public registry tables recompile from the current claim object. If you freeze the object, human permissions remain on stale authority and the Tahl maintenance lock closes by default."

Nera read the clock, then the blank author cell. "Why does a maintenance lock need to know who arrived first?"

"It doesn't. It needs to know which claimant authority is operative."

"Then it should ask that."

Tal deferred to one of the clerks. "It asks the field it has."

The clerk with the paper sleeve lifted it in faint agreement and chewed on.

Trope stood beside C-4 with her hands outside the evidence line. The boom touched the cradle. Tap. A small, regular sound, almost polite. The package had nearly moved a weapon. Now it was being made to wait while humans argued about nouns.

Nera opened the Palisade claim object in source-only view. The public interface rendered a human-colored sphere, Mara Venn's name, and one

large line designed to survive distance, bad eyesight, public feeds, and inattentive officials:

HUMANITY'S FIRST PRESENCE

The time beneath it did not match Mara's gate crossing.

"Recite the physical order," Nera said.

Trope reconciled the aperture archive, suit telemetry, Witness time, and the corrected Khepri-Cairn lattice. "Edge crossed. Mara crossed eighty-four seconds later."

Tal pressed two fingers against the bridge of his nose. "That point is no longer disputed."

"It has never been visible," Nera said.

She removed the legal overlay. The human color drained from Palisade. A traffic permit in the side queue slipped from approved to unresolved. A Tahl membrane-service request changed from pending to denied. On the defense map, ownership color disappeared and left only inhabited volumes, firing exclusions, current command authority, and a cold patch of gray where the system no longer knew whom it was permitted to obey.

The clerk under the blanket, Lessa, looked up. "Membrane service just lost Dock Three."

"I see it," Tal said.

"They have eighteen minutes before the tender has to take the outer loop."

"I see that too."

The clerk returned to her console and began rerouting the tender before anyone answered. The consequence had entered her queue; that was enough to give it a voice.

Tal crowded more of the camera frame. "Restore the operational layer."

"Not until we know what it calls a physical fact," Nera said.

"It does not call anything a physical fact. It displays first presence under the active claim rule."

"Where does the user learn that?"

Tal's mouth opened. Nera withheld her answer until she had traced the timestamp's hidden provenance path across the wall.

It did not end in an aperture sensor. It ended in a policy object called VALID_RESIDENCE_TIME. The object carried a derived label, an advisory label, an evidence manifest, a list of assumptions, four alternative scenarios, and the output of the Alectan Consensus Engine. The personal-author field was blank.

Trope followed the chain backward with her finger, stopping at each transformation. "The rule produced the clock."

"A calculation under a rule produced the clock," Tal said.

"Who chose the rule?"

The records room ventilation shifted behind him. One clerk pulled the blanket tighter. The other sealed the paper sleeve, wrote a time on it, and placed it beside the console as if leftover food also required provenance.

Nera replayed the hash-fixed Engine package and exposed its choices. Residence had been defined as viable controlled habitation rather than

bodily arrival. Tahl embodiment required the complete death-bearing self rather than one living voice. The output request demanded one harmonizable ordering instead of a scenario set.

Under those assumptions, Mara qualified first. When Nera changed only the embodiment frame, Edge qualified first. When she restored complete self and allowed several lawful outputs, no single first presence appeared.

Three lawful answers appeared on the wall. Tal's remaining tea went cold while he looked at them.

The clerk under the blanket said the multi-answer version could not feed traffic.

Nera set the traffic field beside the chronology. "Traffic needs one authority for each dock operation. It does not need one history."

The current object supplied traffic authority and history through one field, a shortcut built during a supply crisis and never dismantled after the tenders stopped waiting. The public panel had passed inspection. The machine tables underneath had simply continued.

"The public panel looks finished," Lessa said. "Finished things get less money."

The other clerk sealed his food sleeve. "Ugly systems receive sympathy. Elegant systems receive memorial plaques."

Tal looked at him.

"I'm logging," the clerk said.

Harmonization had renamed VALID_RESIDENCE_TIME as PRIMARY_FIRST_PRESENCE_TIME. Human color, briefings, access, defense, Mara's honorific, and the public map inherited the new noun; the alternatives remained in the package where ordinary users would never meet them.

"The Engine wrote valid residence," Trope said. "A human layer turned it into first presence."

Marr entered by audio, his voice arriving a fraction late through station command. "An expedition cannot run defense, access, diplomacy, and claim administration on four incompatible scenarios."

"Then command chose one," Nera said. "Show me who."

Tal retrieved the origin certificate. It authenticated the Alectan Expedition Command Policy Office and the hash of a request body no longer present. The signer was a role. Threats had hidden analysts behind offices; retention rules had hidden deliberation; the service identity had survived every migration. Nobody had ordered the human author removed. The blank had accumulated one protection at a time.

Nera recorded the office responsibility and the missing personal author separately. The request could be authenticated if recovered, not read here. Marr called the missing body unnecessary to current operational validity.

The boom tapped C-4. The rollover clock showed thirty-eight minutes.

Rook entered from station command with the compressed patience of someone already managing three emergencies. "What must be corrected before compile?"

Nera pointed to each break in turn. “Physical arrival is hidden. Valid residence occupies its place. The predicate is offscreen. The advisory Engine looks like the author. We still have the office certificate, but not the request or the person who made it.”

Rook addressed Tal. “Can you separate physical chronology from legal status and preserve permissions?”

“Yes. Not in the legacy public panel without redesign.”

“How long?”

“If every scenario must be exposed, longer than we have.”

“Not every scenario. The facts needed to answer the claim at issue.”

Marr said, “A display that foregrounds Edge’s crossing and demotes the governing rule will become an argument for the Tahl claim.”

“A display that foregrounds your rule and hides Edge’s crossing already advances yours,” Nera said.

The legacy editor allowed one claimant, one time, one jurisdiction color, and a note. Tal placed Mara’s legal time in the primary slot and Edge’s crossing below it.

“Stop,” Nera said. “Two rows.”

“The template has one.”

“Old procurement,” the second clerk said, “has constitutional ambitions.”

The real constraints were less amusing: low-vision type, fixed translations, feed capture, emergency color reduction, and wall firmware that rejected dynamic columns. Lessa found a redirect path if they abandoned color priority and let the old panel admit it was old.

“I’ve been waiting two years for the defect to become a feature,” she said.

The traffic controller interrupted with the membrane tender’s final window. Missing it would cost reserve transfer, crew rest, and six hours of escort power. Rook ordered the two-row object, separate machine authority, private disclosure to Mara, equal notice to Seliath, and no public release before the bodies carrying the claim had seen what the station said in their names.

Lessa sent the unfinished panel to a test wall in Cargo South, where a night porter named Anik Vale was waiting with one lens clouded from an old pressure injury. He had not attended the hearing and had been promised no explanation. The wall enlarged the first row, shrank the second, and colored both in the same gray because the emergency palette had already spent its amber on a fire notice.

Anik leaned close enough that his breath marked the glass. One hand remained on the handle of a freight sled whose rear wheel kept drifting left.

“Who arrived first?” Nera asked through the wall pickup.

“The Tahl body.”

“Who has current dock authority?”

“Mara Venn.”

“Why?”

He read the lower row twice. “Because the Tahl body arrived first.”

Tal made a sound through his nose and turned the two rows away from each other. The first became **CROSSED THE APERTURE**. The second became **QUALIFIED FOR CURRENT ALECTAN DOCK AUTHORITY UNDER CONTROLLED-RESIDENCE RULE**. The phrase ran beyond the old line limit and continued on a second screen.

Anik stepped sideways to follow it. The freight sled rolled with him and struck his heel.

"That part loses me after *qualified*."

"Shorter?" Tal asked.

Anik bent to kick the wandering wheel straight. "Put the rule name first. If I need the permit, I'll keep reading."

Lessa rebuilt the lower row. The wall clicked, blanked, and returned with the physical event above and the legal rule beneath. Anik read the first screen, then the second. A cargo call sounded from his wrist.

"Better?" Nera asked.

"Less wrong." He hauled the sled away before anyone could make him choose a final version.

The membrane tender requested the same preview in Tahl translation. Its pilot did not comment on title. The pilot objected to the verb chosen for Edge's crossing because the available Tahl word also described a body entering a medical bath under assistance.

Bridge was not present to repair the sentence. A maintenance translator offered three alternatives. The pilot rejected all three and sent a four-beat sound through the channel, too brief for the human transcript.

"What does that mean?" Tal asked.

The translator hesitated. "Something like entered under one's own load. Also the first limb on a warm surface after travel."

"Can the panel carry it?"

"Not in speech synthesis."

The pilot sent the sound again, slower. The translator laughed before muting herself.

"What?" Rook asked.

"She says the wall may use the ugly human phrase if the flight recorder keeps her word beside it. She also says her tea has been reheated twice and a third reheating becomes a Palisade offense."

Tal attached the original sound to the source layer. The public rendering kept its human awkwardness. Before he could test it again, Cargo South reported that Anik's rear wheel had finally come off.

Tal dragged PHYSICAL ARRIVAL into the primary row. The legacy editor demanded one claimant, one body, one species, one jurisdiction, and, with remarkable confidence, one stable pronunciation. He entered EDGE VOICE OF SELIATH-IN-THREE, replaced jurisdiction with evidence sources, and refused to make Edge a separate citizen for the convenience of a box.

The editor then demanded a policy owner. Tal's hand moved toward the Consensus Engine service identity and stopped.

"That is what happened," he said.

The old panel required an owner even for an observation. VALID_RESIDENCE_TIME became FIRST_PRESENCE_TIME; the office authorized the map; the display credited the service. Tal had noticed on the third local revision. A blood-stabilizer tender was waiting, so he marked the defect nonblocking and compiled. Food, shelter, and radiation transfers followed, and each emergency laid another layer over the first choice.

"Stopping compile would have preserved the route," he said. "I chose the tender and buried the defect behind rollover. Then another emergency inherited it."

Lessa admitted signing the fifth copy after learning the service was named as source. Tal had told her the office certificate remained reachable. She had accepted reachable as visible.

The tenders had been real. Tal's signature remained real too.

"No one ordered you to hide the author," Trope said.

"No."

"Do not use the chain to disappear," Nera said.

Tal faced the camera. "I'm not."

Lessa folded the station blanket over her chair. "Neither am I."

The rollover clock showed twenty-four minutes.

Mara joined the disclosure channel with sealant dried along one sleeve and a maintenance checklist still open on her wrist. She carried a dented cup of broth; the link's chemical channel reported pepper paste. The chair prepared for her waited empty. She stood at the evidence table, took one swallow, and read the heading before anyone could frame it for her.

"Show me the body order," she said.

Nera expanded only the physical row.

Edge voice of Seliath-in-Three crossed first. Mara crossed eighty-four seconds later.

Mara rubbed at the sealant on her sleeve until a gray flake broke free beneath her thumbnail. "Did Edge physically enter Palisade before I did?"

"Yes," Trope said.

"How long?"

"Eighty-four seconds."

"No clock correction reverses it?"

"No."

Mara drank again. The broth had cooled enough to leave a red line of oil on the cup. "That plaque's been using my name to answer a question my body didn't win."

Nera opened the legal row. "Your controlled residence qualified first under the current Alectan complete-self interpretation."

"Does it still?"

"Yes. Under that interpretation, under Alectan jurisdiction, pending hearing."

"Then I'm physically second and legally first under a rule humans selected."

"Yes."

"Who selected complete self?"

Nera showed her the office certificate, the request hash, the Engine assumptions, the missing body, and the blank personal-author field. "The Alectan Expedition Command Policy Office requested and adopted the ordering. This package does not show the request words or the person who submitted them."

"Marr?"

"His domain. His office responsibility. Not his personal authorship from the evidence available."

Mara read the hash as though it might become language if denied enough sympathy. "Did I authorize any of this?"

"No," Nera said. "You delivered habitat records, accepted an operational title, and relied on the ordinary display. There is no evidence that you framed the Engine request, selected complete self, approved the mapping, or knew physical arrival had disappeared."

"I stood under the plaque."

Nera touched the plaque image. "That made you visible. It didn't make you the author."

Mara set the broth beside C-4, outside the evidence line. "Good. Don't clear me by making me stupid either. I believed the record because every office around me behaved as though checking it was ceremonial."

Tal lowered his face to the editor.

Mara caught the retreat. "Was it ceremonial?"

"No," he said.

"Did you know the Engine was being credited for the office's decision?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Since the third local revision."

"How many copies?"

"Seven with my authentication. Five after I understood the display defect."

"And you kept it?"

Tal explained the tenders. He did not recite them as justification. He gave names, cargo, delays, and the point at which each emergency had allowed the next one to inherit the defect. Mara listened and left the question open.

When he finished, she pushed the cup toward the camera as if he might drink from it through the secure link. "That is a terrible reason."

"Yes."

"It's also a reason."

"Yes."

"Put both in the record."

Nera entered Mara's reliance beside Tal's urgency and kept the two from canceling each other.

Marr said, "The rule was not invented to falsify your crossing. It was chosen to identify a claimant capable of controlled residence and species-bearing death."

Mara addressed the speaker grille. "Then argue that in a hearing. Do not hide it inside my arrival time."

"Your claim stays yours."

"You were asking the clock to make the argument before I entered the room."

The traffic controller reported nineteen minutes remaining in the tender's window.

Tal sent the unfinished panel to the wall. The upper row represented physical arrival. The lower row represented current Alectan valid residence. Machine-readable authority attached only to the lower row, where access and defense systems could consume it while the chronology above stayed unchanged.

Mara read every label.

"Mark the legal row provisional."

Marr objected. "The Alectan rule is current, not provisional within Alectan command."

"The title is disputed," Mara said. "Your jurisdiction is not the universe."

Nera added CURRENT ALECTAN INTERPRETATION and PENDING COMPETENT HEARING.

Mara pointed to the honorific. "Remove first presence wherever it means bodily order. I'll argue first valid resident if that's my claim. I won't serve as proof that I crossed first."

Tal asked whether she wanted a statement attached.

"No."

"A sentence may prevent others from defining your position."

"My position can survive one cycle without becoming a product." Her attention returned to the rows. "Can every ordinary user reach the assumptions?"

"One action," Lessa said.

"Make it one."

Rook put his name on the local correction, its jurisdiction, its evidence, and the warning that it awarded no final title. Pell sealed the old display, sandbox replay, Tal's redesign history, and corrected object as separate evidence. The redirect card passed on seven display classes, failed on two, and rendered the Tahl translation upside down on one maintenance wall.

Lessa stared at the inverted text. "That wall has been doing this for six months."

"Why is it still in service?" Rook asked.

"It is outside a washroom."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the answer procurement accepted."

They excluded the wall from public release and issued a work order under Lessa's name.

Marr directed Alectan systems to comply wherever Rook possessed local authority. "Compliance is not agreement. Visible alternatives will weaken the human claim."

"Hidden alternatives already strengthened it," Nera said.

At six minutes, Tal committed the test object. The upper row placed Edge first in physical arrival and Mara second by eighty-four seconds. The lower row ranked Mara first under current Alectan valid residence, with controlled habitation, complete death-bearing self, Alectan jurisdiction, office adoption, and pending hearing displayed beside it. Seliath's later qualification under the same rule remained visible rather than dissolving into nonarrival.

The traffic permit approved. The membrane-service request advanced from denied to pending under the correct authority path. The coolant tender received routing with two minutes left. Its pilot acknowledged in a flat voice, recited the corridor, and added, after a pause, "Tell records I had already reheated the same tea twice."

Lessa keyed the response. "Records accepts no liability for a third reheating."

The pilot disconnected.

Tal traced the corrected object through access, defense, traffic, briefing, and public registry. His name authenticated the local redesign. Rook's name carried the order. Nera's custody chain verified the evidence. Marr's office stayed attached to the adopted legal frame. No recovered request authenticated the original frame.

Mara studied the physical row and did not ask anyone to move, soften, or conceal the eighty-four seconds. She maintained the legal claim until Seliath could answer the complete-self rule in a hearing. Then she picked up her broth and returned to the habitat shift without giving the station the face it wanted for the correction.

Two true times occupied one screen. Beside the Engine's answer, the human question was still missing.

. . .

Mara laid a corroded pump collar on the witness table and refused the clean jacket Alectan counsel had supplied. Above her, the corrected display stated the difficult facts and left them unresolved: Edge crossed first; Mara crossed eighty-four seconds later; under the current Alectan complete-self rule, Mara remained first valid resident pending hearing.

Both tables accepted the hard objects already in the room. Edge had been alive, purposeful, and acting as Seliath; Seliath had chosen the smallest viable claimant partly to force recognition. Mara had built the first broad, integrated habitat and had carried its failures in her own body.

"Good," Pell said. "We have removed innocence from a case that does not require it."

He deleted WHO DESERVES PALISADE from the decision fields. The hearing would ask whether Edge had genuinely been Seliath while isolated, what kind of residence the crossing established, and what protection and standing followed before title.

Alectan counsel argued that first flag protected a complete death-bearing claimant in controlled residence. Tahl counsel answered that Edge

was no token: Edge lived, acted, maintained a controlled environment, and could have died before the rest of Seliath crossed.

"If every living voice is a complete claimant," Alectan counsel said, "one person may arrive three times."

"One person arrived once," Tahl counsel replied. "Your categories multiplied us. We did not."

He called Mara.

She carried the pump collar to the witness position because the proceeding had delayed its replacement and she intended to take it back. The clerk offered a protective pad. Mara examined the clean pad, examined the collar, and placed the corroded metal directly on the table.

"The table is station property," the clerk said.

"So is the corrosion."

Pell looked down at his tea. The clerk withdrew the pad.

Alectan counsel asked what made the human habitat a residence rather than an airtight crate.

"Air and water after the commissioning team left. Waste that stopped being cargo. A shell I could inspect, repair, and answer for. Enough redundancy that one broken part didn't turn the claim into a corpse." Mara rested one hand on the pump collar. "Edge survived, acted, and made a claim. That's not nothing. It's not what I built."

Tahl counsel asked whether she remained a person while asleep, unconscious, dependent on records, or unable to reach part of her own memory.

"Usually," Mara said, and the public seats laughed before the question became painful.

Her fingers closed around the collar. "I would still be me. I might not be able to do everything I could do before."

"Then access to every part of a self is not your test."

"No. That is the problem." She rubbed sealant from her thumbnail and only moved the black mark. "I won't buy my claim by discounting somebody else's life. Argue residence. Argue embodiment. Edge's worth is not your discount code."

The translator returned VALUE TOKEN USED TO REDUCE ANOTHER CLAIM.

"That's uglier," Mara said.

"More exact," Tahl counsel replied.

"Keep it."

Alectan counsel did not pretend the exchange had resolved in his favor. "Shared law still requires an administrable event. No hearing can suspend every action until every species supplies a final theory of self. The Alectan rule is published, operational, and reviewable. It locates responsibility and preserves Mara as first valid resident while the broader treaty question remains open."

The side doors retracted separately.

Edge entered along the lowest access path, moving close to the floor in a quick four-beat gait. Depth followed at a slower pace, one flank brushing the

pressure-adapted rail as though comparing the chamber with a remembered map. Bridge chose the translation path beside the claimant display. Warm mineral air escaped from each body lock before the seals reseated, carrying the smell of stone after rain and something faintly metallic from the Tahl atmosphere.

Three low, long bodies tended three stations. Each had four load-bearing limbs, two finer forelimbs, paired eye clusters, and a temporary orientation tag. Only one claimant record appeared above them.

SELIATH-IN-THREE.

The hearing could receive body position, atmosphere, declared access, and the duration of private exchange. Memory-adjacent inference remained forbidden. It would know when Seliath integrated, not own the interior of integration.

Pell asked Seliath to describe Edge's isolation.

"Bodily survival under severe narrowing," Edge said.

"Interrupted access within continuing identity," Depth answered.

"Both are true," Bridge said, "and your form wants them to vote."

The procedural officer had, in fact, opened a majority field. Edge braced against the rail.

"There is no vote," Bridge said. "You are counting locations of unfinished thought."

Pell removed the field and preserved the correction.

Edge gave the bodily history: restraint release, rising heat, a kinked feed line, atmosphere established while exterior response might kill that body before the others crossed. Fear had not suspended agency. Isolation had narrowed Seliath without making Edge a proxy for someone safely elsewhere.

Depth named what was absent: autobiographical reach, deliberative breadth, the other voices pressing against a decision. The separated voices, in return, had not possessed Edge's new fear or movement.

Alectan counsel pressed capacity. Bridge answered that the situation had changed. Edge struck the rail once. "This voice is not the part you sent to speak for a person elsewhere."

Seliath requested private exchange. Pell granted it.

Edge approached the contact surface between the stations. Depth met one shoulder against it. Bridge joined last. The hearing display stated PRIVATE EXCHANGE: NOT RECORDED. Beneath it, the civil-status timer counted down.

Nobody broke the silence. Trope heard the contact surface cooling beneath three bodies, the translator fan, Mara turning the pump collar a quarter turn against the table, and cargo striking a distant junction in a corridor that did not care who owned Palisade. Pell's clerk quietly removed his tea before the cup could stain the evidence pad.

After forty-three seconds, Bridge reentered the language field. The commitment indicator lit.

Before Bridge spoke, Edge asked the room to lower the vibration in the claimant rail. The procedural officer checked atmosphere and pressure before

understanding that the complaint was about the low mechanical hum beneath the floor.

"Unsafe?" he asked.

"No," Edge said. "It resembles the restraint release at crossing."

Depth pressed more weight against the same rail. "Keep it."

"The cooling pattern helps this voice locate the contact surface," Depth said.

"Lower it here," Edge said, striking the pad beneath one forelimb. "Not there."

The controls offered one vibration setting for one claimant. Lessa found two maintenance dampers, neither intended for a hearing rail, and wired them through local switches while everyone waited. The hum softened beneath Edge and continued beneath Depth. Bridge tested the translation pickup between them.

The procedural officer opened a guidance field.

Edge struck the rail. "You have repaired one floor."

The field closed. Lessa labeled the two switches **EDGE SIDE** and **DEPTH SIDE** in temporary tape. Three hearings later, somebody would peel off the labels and leave the switches because no one remembered what the uneven floor had been for.

"Seliath commits that Edge was Seliath during the crossing. Isolation narrowed access, deliberation, and capacity. It did not suspend personhood. Seliath deliberately selected this voice as the smallest viable claimant in order to obtain recognition and control under a law built around other bodies. One person owns the crossing and the strategy."

Alectan counsel did not soften the next question.

"If an attacker had killed Edge before Depth and Bridge arrived, what exactly would have died?"

People quieted in a different way. Even those who believed they knew the answer seemed to wait for a simpler one.

"This voice would have died completely where the weapon struck," Edge said.

"Seliath would have lived through surviving voices, persistent commitments, common history, and the capacity for later integration," Depth said.

Bridge said, "Your ordinary translations offer injury or total death. Injury erases the death. Total death erases the survival."

"Would Seliath have been murdered?"

"Here, yes," Edge said.

"Not everywhere," Depth said.

The commitment indicator went dark.

Alectan counsel lowered his notes. Tahl counsel stayed seated. Edge's load-bearing limbs drove harder into the floor pads while Depth laid one flank along the contact rail. Bridge's translator fan continued to turn without producing language.

After several breaths, the three bodies met.

The timer showed forty-six minutes.

When the indicator lit again, one committed channel spoke.

"Seliath would die where Edge died, could remain alive elsewhere, and would preserve continuity through surviving voices. The surviving person would be genuinely Seliath and irreversibly altered. The person-configuration that existed before the killing would never exist again."

Witness House's public record excluded private memory. Edge named only kinds of loss: sensor history preserved nowhere else in the same way, bodily fear, learned movement, relationships shaped through that body, and futures available only from its local history.

The lawyers tried to make Edge's personhood settle title and Mara's residence settle worth. Mara struck the pump collar against the table.

"Keep the questions separate. My work may establish residence. It does not make me worth more. Edge's survival may establish a claim. It does not need title before it becomes a life."

Pell removed WORTH from the title calculation and locked it as a prohibition.

Trope testified without her rifle. She had seen Edge cross, work, choose, and later join commitments Seliath owned. She had withheld the first-contact shot because no target was established, not because she had solved distributed personhood in the available seconds.

"Does uncertainty permit Edge's arrival to disappear?" Tahl counsel asked.

"No."

"Does arrival prove exclusive title?"

"No."

The settlement clerk looked at the wall. "We've used first for six different things."

Trope separated the overloaded field into five headings: PHYSICAL CHRONOLOGY, PROTECTION, STANDING, TITLE, and WORTH. The first four could govern clocks, restraint, hearing, and legal victory. The fifth belonged to none of them.

"Preserve the living event and the evidence," she said. "Don't turn uncertainty into automatic Tahl title. Don't turn it into permission to pretend Edge arrived nowhere."

Rook spoke from station command. "If Pell finds provisional standing, I can attach equal anti-den-theft protection to Mara and every living Seliath voice. I can suspend exclusive transfer, disposal, irreversible settlement, and attempts to manufacture priority through death. Both habitats keep maintenance, defense, aid, evidence work, and ordinary life. I cannot decide final title."

The status clerk raised one hand. "The settlement-control table accepts one priority claimant."

Rook studied the two-row display. "Yesterday it accepted one chronology."

"The replacement field is not built."

"Then do not use the field to perform the hearing."

Iven Tal appeared beside her on the systems wall. He looked worse than he had an hour earlier and more awake. Lessa sat at the adjacent console with no blanket and a fresh cup whose steam had not yet given up.

"I can bind protection to bodies, standing to claimant records, and title to an unresolved field," Tal said. "The machines will complain."

"Let them complain in writing," Rook said.

Lessa had already opened the exception log. "They've been waiting their whole lives."

Pell found that Edge had crossed as a living, answerable voice of Seliath. The strategic choice of the smallest viable body did not erase the embodied act. Edge's arrival preserved protection and standing while complete qualifying residence remained unresolved.

Mara kept controlled-residence standing. Seliath entered the same protected, co-pending field. The title box stayed gray.

Tal committed the status. The old object protested three times. Protection bound separately to Mara, Edge, Depth, and Bridge; standing attached to Mara Venn and Seliath-in-Three; title became UNRESOLVED: GRAY.

Rook signed. Exclusive transfer and irreversible settlement moved to joint hold while both habitats retained maintenance and defense.

Mara preserved the complete-residence argument. Tahl counsel preserved first-living-member doctrine. Alectan counsel reserved appeal. All accepted immediate protection against title by force.

The rollover completed with seventeen seconds remaining.

Across the station, old walls opened the redirect card. New walls rendered two protected claims beneath two true chronologies. One washroom display inverted the Tahl line again and was physically switched off by a maintenance worker who wrote NO METAPHYSICS UNTIL FIRMWARE REPAIR on the service tag.

The title field named no claimant.

Edge carried the bodily memory of crossing. Depth carried continuity. Bridge shaped the language through which strangers might answer. The three pressures met, and the commitment indicator lit.

One claimant channel spoke.

"We arrived first."

CHAPTER 9

Voluntary

PENDING glowed on Pavan Serr's wrist while both hands were inside a power cabinet.

Trope watched the lower-left clamp loosen by a fraction. "You're losing pressure."

"I'm thinking."

"You can think with the driver seated."

Pavan swore under his breath, reset the bit, and leaned his shoulder into the panel. The witness form stayed open above his wrist. It asked what he had seen, what he had been told, and which claimant he thought should prevail. One signature would release the whole statement for appeals, briefings, advocacy, and any later use the Policy Office could fit beneath the word related.

The buttons looked friendly enough. SIGN. DECLINE. SAVE FOR LATER. REQUEST MORE TIME.

Below them, his berth renewal had seven minutes left.

At the other end of the bay, two fitters argued about whether someone assigned after both habitats stabilized could testify to first residence without becoming a time traveler. A ration dispenser rejected a cup for being six grams over allowance. Its owner removed three pieces of ice and tried again.

"Pending isn't an opinion," Pavan said.

"Your supervisor can see it."

"That's what makes it one."

A ventilation cart rattled past. Lysa Renn walked beside it with one hand on the cartridge rack and the same form open against her palm. She read Pavan's screen upside down.

"You still have twenty-one hours."

"My berth has six minutes."

"That seems badly coordinated."

"Thank you, atmosphere control."

"I control filters, not employment law."

"You control air. It felt adjacent."

Lysa pushed on. Her own request for a return seat was still waiting to be ranked.

Tessa Vale had signed before loading shift because her Friday transfer packet needed a command reference. Jae Orin signed with three years of atmosphere logs because he believed Mara's claim was stronger. Every signature made the custody wall chime. By the tenth chime, orderly processing had begun to sound like worship.

Nera stood in the bay door, reading the form. A strand of violet hair had escaped its tie and stuck to the gray collar of her work shirt.

"This is five questions pretending to be one," she said.

Pavan latched the cabinet. "The signature is mine."

"The answer may be. The room isn't." Nera tapped the renewal timer. "Neither is that."

He wiped his hands on his trousers and left a black stripe down one thigh. "If I sign because I agree, you'll tell me the agreement may have been manufactured. If I refuse because I'm scared, Marr will say the refusal was manufactured. When do I get to have an opinion without everybody auditing the furniture?"

Trope glanced around the bay. "Probably when the furniture stops deciding where you sleep."

Pavan stared at her, then laughed once despite himself. "So never."

"Probably never."

He had expected reassurance. Not getting it seemed to help. He picked up the driver and checked every screw again.

Pell called the review in a room built for six and holding eleven. Temporary terminals warmed the air. Lysa rolled a filter gasket between her fingers. Tessa took the chair nearest the door. Jae placed a sealed atmosphere log on the table and kept checking the time on his wrist.

The only empty chair flashed a maintenance fault, so Pavan stood beside it as if he had come to inspect the furniture.

Marr attended without counsel. His uniform had been cleaned since the last hearing, though a pale line of sealant remained on one cuff. Either the laundry had failed or he had gone back to work before it finished. Trope could believe either.

Pell put the witness form on the wall. "I can admit a fact without certifying the way it was collected."

"The form allows people to decline," Marr said.

"The button works," Trope said.

Marr turned to her. "Do you have evidence that anyone was threatened?"

"No."

"That I ordered retaliation?"

"No."

"That a berth, assignment, reference, pay record, or reliability score changed because of this statement?"

"Not yet."

His jaw tightened. "Then what exactly am I defending?"

"Whether a request is free just because nobody says the threat out loud."

Marr sat back. "No expedition can separate every office from every other office. The same people who know whether a technician is reliable also know whether the technician cooperated with an investigation. The office ranking a berth may need the assignment record. The office writing a reference needs to know whether required work was done."

"Is this required work?" Pell asked.

"No."

"Can supervisors see who hasn't done it?"

"Yes."

Marr brought the personnel map forward. "Visibility is not retaliation."

"No," Trope said. "Sometimes it saves retaliation the trouble."

Tessa looked down at the form she had already signed. Pavan pressed his thumb against the broken chair's fault light until it blinked against his skin.

Trope asked who ranked Lysa's return seat. The answer crossed logistics, command review, section chiefs, and mission personnel. Every link could see whether she had signed; none carried an independent promise that the seat would stay put.

Pavan's renewal used the same chain. Tessa's reference did too. Jae's contamination access was separate, but his next contract would be reviewed by officers whose appeal position his testimony supported.

"I think Mara has the better claim," Jae said. "I also think Pavan should be able to disagree and still have a bed."

"The tool lockers are assigned too," Pavan said.

Lysa had seen Mara's crew hold atmosphere through two filter failures. She had not seen Mara cross. The form fused those facts into one statement. Tessa knew the cargo dates, not whether those dates proved exclusive title. She had signed because her reference was due Friday and because cooperation would later be visible to whoever wrote it.

Marr did not soften his case. References, berths, medical limits, staffing, manifests, and safety ratings were real. So was the need to keep people alive with fewer offices than anyone wanted.

Trope listened until he finished. "A person can't know a no is safe when every way out runs through the person asking."

"Connected authority is how an expedition survives."

"It can keep people alive and make refusal dangerous in the same hour."

The terminal fan kicked into a frantic higher speed.

Pell looked at the workers rather than the wall. "I'm admitting what you observed. I'm not certifying this form as voluntary."

Marr opened his mouth, then closed it.

Pell continued. "The legal endorsement stays unresolved. So does the politics. The raw records can enter while we fix the collection problem."

The next manifest ranking would run in seven hours. Rook arrived with an unfinished bowl of stew and sat on the edge of a storage cabinet because every chair was taken.

Marr listed the cost of intervention. Useful people could lose seats. Obsolete assignments might survive a freeze. Neutral reranking would duplicate command. Witnesses might change their answers after learning which one helped them.

Rook scraped the side of his bowl. "All true."

Marr waited.

"Still not a reason to leave it like this."

Rook could not rewrite Alectan employment law from Palisade. He could decide what Palisade admitted into a local claim record while both claimants remained exposed. He asked Pell how quickly Witness House could take collection away from supervisors.

"Immediately, if I borrow two staff and a room."

"You have one room," Pavan said. "The chair is trying to die."

"Then immediately with bad furniture."

A young policy clerk began reading the proposed protection into the record. "Witnesses shall retain nonprejudicial options for silence, delay, withdrawal, revision, and unchanged submission, with adverse personnel consequences suspended pending independently authored cause determination and neutral review availability."

Trope rolled her eyes before she could stop herself.

The clerk looked wounded. He was earnest, exhausted, and holding three versions of the same order.

"Sorry," Trope said. "Can we say it the way they'll hear it?" She nodded toward Pavan. "You can say no. Your boss won't see the answer. If your berth changes, somebody else has to put a real reason on it before it moves."

Pavan pointed at her. "That one."

The clerk lowered the slate. "That one is legally incomplete."

"Put the complete version in the order," Pell said. "Put hers on the door."

Refusal status vanished from personnel views. Changes to berth, transport, assignment, pay, references, or reliability froze through appeal unless an independent reason already existed. A neutral logistics cell would rerank the seats under the same rules.

The route would delay the manifest by forty-three minutes and probably cost a loading corridor. Rook logged the delay under his own name. Marr filed his objection under his.

"You're putting delay into finite air and one road home," Marr said.

"I'm putting someone reachable into the decisions that punish people," Rook said. "Appeal it. Implement it first."

Marr looked at Tessa's bouncing knee, Lysa's worn gasket, Jae's clock, and the black insulation on Pavan's trousers.

"Under protest," he said. "Yes."

Pavan stood outside the privacy alcove with his sealed tool bag between his boots.

"Can my supervisor see what I choose?" he asked Nera.

"No."

"Berth control?"

"No. They can see your work record and safety status. Not this."

"If the berth changes?"

"Someone outside your chain has to review the reason before it does."

Pavan looked at Trope. "Is that safe?"

"Safer."

"That's not the same thing."

"No."

He waited.

Trope sighed. "It's the answer I'd sign."

"That is almost comforting."

"Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation."

He went inside.

Three minutes later his wrist read ASSIGNMENT RENEWED, NINETY DAYS. The claim statement did not appear anywhere in the work record. Pavan released his hull, power, and maintenance observations, declined the political and legal sections, and came out to a green berth light.

"That proves one no survived once," he said.

"Yes."

Lysa kept her atmosphere and habitation observations but withdrew physical firstness and exclusive title. Tessa kept the cargo dates and service records. Jae separated his contamination work from the briefing language and still endorsed the complete-self interpretation.

The safer process produced less agreement and better evidence.

It also moved the cost.

Witness House asked Lysa to return for a second interview so the filter-failure records could enter without the legal conclusions attached. She declined. The new form did not ask why.

Without her live authentication, another contamination-qualified worker had to rebuild the maintenance lineage from raw logs. Jae was the only one outside mandatory rest. Pell assigned the work. It took four hours and erased the only live channel Jae had booked with his son before the next gate closure.

No alarm marked the loss. The reservation simply vanished from his wrist, and the fee returned automatically. Somewhere far away, a child waited for a call that had stopped existing.

When the reconstruction ended, Lysa came back for the gasket she had left in the room. Jae was still at the table, eyes red, one hand flat on the sealed record.

"You could've answered six questions," he said.

"Yes."

"Were you too tired?"

"Yes." She picked up the gasket. "I was also angry. They used me once already. And I wanted Marr's appeal to lose an easy witness."

Pell glanced up from the terminal. "You didn't have to tell us that."

"I know. I wanted him to know."

Jae pushed the record toward custody. "My son doesn't get those four hours back because her no was real."

"No," Pell said.

"And she doesn't lose the no because part of her reason was ugly."

"No."

Lysa met Jae's eyes. "I'm sorry you missed the call. I'd still refuse."

He laughed without humor. "Good. I'd still be angry."

Nobody rushed in to make either of them noble.

Pell filed a burden objection under his own order. Lysa's motives stayed out of her personnel record. Jae's extra shift and missed call did not become evidence that he opposed safe refusal. Witness House owned the reassignment and the grievance that came with it.

Tessa had stopped in the doorway. "No one in this room has behaved beautifully."

Jae looked at the completed lineage. “That should improve admissibility.”

Lysa’s mouth twitched. It fixed nothing. It did make the room feel inhabited again.

By shift change, the human appeal had lost three broad endorsements. It still held continuous-residence evidence, Jae’s genuine legal support, properly sourced records, and a visible history of how each statement had been gathered. It no longer borrowed certainty from people who needed command’s permission to sleep, travel, or leave.

Someone pushed the broken chair toward maintenance. Its fault light blinked with the steady dignity of a problem the station finally knew how to classify.

Trope and Nera stayed to reassign the remaining appeal work. Nera closed each task window a little harder than necessary.

“The next question is personal,” she said.

The work table between them held only closed task windows. “Is it about the exterior rotation?” Trope asked.

“No.” Nera took a breath. Trope went still, and Nera’s face changed. “You don’t have to hear it.”

“I asked what it was about.”

“I thought you were putting up a boundary.”

“I was trying to work out what kind of danger it was.”

Nera almost laughed. “You do know how to make a person feel special.”

“I didn’t say you were the danger.”

“That is not the rescue you think it is.”

Trope almost laughed, then didn’t. Warmth had arrived too fast beneath her ribs, and she had no useful category for it.

Nera waited her out. “May I invite you to dinner? Personal dinner. After the next gate review. Not a debrief. Not a group meal. Just dinner.”

Trope wanted to say yes before the question ended. The speed of it made her suspicious.

“Why now?”

Nera’s expression tightened. “Because I wanted to ask.”

“After we spent all day proving that conditions can manufacture agreement.”

Hurt crossed Nera’s face before anger gave it shape. “I’m not offering you a demonstration.”

“I didn’t say you were.”

“You asked whether I’m using you to finish the lesson.”

Trope heard herself and wished, too late, that she had chosen any other opening. “I’m asking whether the work changed what you think I owe.”

“Nothing changed what you owe.” Nera’s voice became careful, but not cold. “If you say no, I’ll still work with you. I’ll still be your friend. Your access and assignments stay where they are. I won’t ask why, and I won’t ask again unless you bring it back.”

She stopped. The next breath caught high in her chest.

The corridor clock advanced. Null-control expected them in six minutes.

Trope asked, "Why this interval?"

"Because the human window may open and you may leave. Because if it fails, the next emergency will eat us. Because yesterday I was afraid, and today I was less afraid for about thirty seconds." Nera looked away, then back. "I used them badly."

Trope's first impulse was to explain that bad timing and coercion were not the same thing. That would have turned Nera's admission into a lesson and spared Trope from answering it as desire.

She let it stand.

"You made us late," Trope said.

"Yes."

"So did I."

"Yes."

Nera's mouth stayed set. Trope was grateful for that.

What Trope had was Nera's words, the brief relief where Nera had steadied the shoulder ring, a violet strand against gray fabric, and the sting of having made an invitation defend itself.

"Would you still want to work with me if I said no?"

"Yes."

"Would you still be my friend?"

"Yes. I can't promise I'd feel nothing."

"I wasn't going to ask you to."

"You were thinking about it."

Trope looked at her.

Nera's fists opened. "You're very legible when you're trying not to be."

"Are you asking me specifically? Not the witness. Not the soldier. Not the person who understands the form."

"Yes. You. The difficult person in front of me."

Trope let out a breath she had not meant to hold. "Then yes. I want dinner."

"One dinner."

"I don't know what comes after."

"Neither do I."

They put it after the gate review. Duty could move the hour. Either woman could cancel.

Then they ran.

Null-control had expected Nera five minutes earlier and Trope three.

The human gate watch chilled Palisade. Power moved into the optical instruments. Traffic cleared the axis. Frost silvered one detector housing. Pell had separated the four clocks correctly, but a junior controller had grouped the local copy beneath ORIGIN AUTHORITY.

Nera reached the console and stopped. "That's mine. Keep the raw clock. Relabel it LOCAL COMMITTED COPY. Put in the record that review opened without me."

The values were sound. The noun was wrong. Pell entered the delay under Nera's name and Trope's.

Lysa waited beyond the pressure door in a return harness, her sealed bag between her boots and a green protected-manifest band around her wrist. Inside were two shirts, a respirator, a ceramic cup wrapped in socks, and a packet of prohibited seeds she had declared herself.

Palisade could watch a road opened elsewhere. It could not open one from this end. Four independent clocks reached zero.

At zero, the null stayed dark. The instruments recorded ordinary stars, carrier silence, and four clocks continuing past the window. At sixty seconds the interval expired.

"Record no local aperture," Nera said.

Marr tested the alternatives. Malformed event. Beacon error. Clock disagreement. Every value stayed within tolerance.

"My delay," Nera said again.

"And mine," Trope said.

Their lateness had not closed the road. It had consumed attention and put a bad label into the first draft. The cost was small enough to hide, which made preserving it easy to justify.

Traffic resumed. Lysa's harness jammed on release. Trope worked the buckle free.

"Do I unpack?" Lysa asked.

Rook answered the question beneath it. Her protected rank survived. The transit did not. She could return the bag to storage or leave it sealed.

"Leave it sealed," she said. "I don't want to perform optimism twice."

The record named the schedule, the expected evidence, what the instruments observed, and what failed to arrive. Cause stayed UNKNOWN.

"Silence tells us nothing," Marr said.

"It tells us the road didn't open here," Trope said. "That's all."

By the time the Tahl window reached zero, Lysa's sealed bag had gone back to cold storage, Pavan's green berth light had been reassigned to the next shift, and the frost beneath the detector housing had melted into a towel no one remembered placing there. The food cart had come and gone. Two controllers had changed seats. Seliath, Nera, Pell, Marr, and Trope were still watching the same clocks.

The Tahl window failed too.

A controller called it the second attempt.

"Second scheduled window," Bridge said. "An attempt by whom?"

The controller changed the field.

At zero, the null stayed dark. No Tahl signal, voice, feedstock, catalyst, memory media, tools, or legal consultation crossed.

The controller opened a combined incident form.

"Separate records," Pell said.

"One destination," Marr said.

"Different origins, different systems, different authorities," Nera replied. "They may share a cause. We don't know that yet."

Edge rested one palm on the rail. "Home may have chosen, suffered, or failed."

"We do not know which word belongs," Depth said.

Seliath cut catalyst use and deferred growth before anyone outside the claimant prescribed it. The work showed quickly. Depth's voice arrived late. Edge's contact pads stayed cold. Bridge asked one question twice because the first answer had not reached the shared surface.

Rook ordered a combined inventory in the old loading gallery. Scales, terminals, and incompatible storage cases crowded the floor. A compressor hammered every eleven seconds until Pavan wedged polymer beneath its mount. His claim choice did not appear anywhere on the assignment slate clipped to his belt.

The inventory refused to become one reassuring total. Human food, Tahl feedstock, membranes, scrubber reserve, sterile culture, medical substrate, catalyst, power electronics, and fabrication capacity served different bodies and belonged to different owners. No one was dying that day. One pressure injury could change the room.

A delayed burst arrived from high polar orbit by ordinary radio.

CONTINUITY TENDER K-17.

The Aster delegation carried a compact depot, autonomous tugs, offer logic, and no authority to improvise. Its first offer was short: a null-sensor pump, sterile polymer, human medical substrate, Tahl catalyst, power electronics, and nutrient precursor.

The materials came with witnessed receipt, disclosed origin, no debt, no title recognition, no archive mirror, no permanent integration, and no promise to accept anything else.

The second offer was much longer. Aster wanted external port administration, first refusal on route services, a customs concession, Aster arbitration, archive mirrors, permanent transponder integration, preferred telemetry, and automatic continuation.

Nothing hid in fine print. The help and the danger used the same font. A three-hour clock began.

Mara measured the pump twice. "I can fit this with a reversible collar."

Marr wanted the parcel accepted. Refusing symbolic dependence would not repair a sensor or feed a person. Mara agreed about the need and refused the trap. She wanted published dimensions, local testing, no lock, and every original connector left intact.

Bridge read the arbitration clause. Aster continuity law would decide whether Seliath survived a damaged voice by using an ontology written by a machine polity that claimed continuity with a dead dynasty.

"Interested doctrine," Depth said.

Edge touched the port clause. "Administration of movement is sovereignty with better manners."

Pell objected to the archive mirrors. Nera found the three broad verbs buried in the permission set: filter, normalize, derive. Aster could preserve results while making the path back to raw evidence disappear.

The pump and the falling clock shared one screen. Refusal looked like choosing failure. Nobody in the gallery needed that pressure explained to them.

Nera asked K-17 what remained usable after a later no.

The answer came back within the delegation's authority. The materials would belong locally, accept third-party repair, permit published collar designs, and create no debt or preference right. Refusing the larger instrument would still count as refusal.

Rook separated the offers. "We take the bridge package under emergency authority. The concession stays visible and unsigned."

Marr folded his arms. "Accepting this lets Aster set the next deadline and makes the next refusal harder."

"Yes," Rook said.

"Put that in before the package helps us."

Pell did.

Mara authorized contact with human and jointly governed systems under reversible conditions. Seliath separately approved catalyst and Tahl-system contact. Nera preserved the raw transmission and each transformation. Marr signed compliance beneath his objection.

K-17's tugs descended on ordinary trajectories and seated the parcel against the cradle. Pell witnessed mass, serials, radiation, and contamination. Mara cut nothing until the readings matched.

The pump passed bench tolerance. The first collar stood six-tenths of a millimeter proud.

Mara stared at it. "Of course it does."

Nera sent the failed adapter to custody instead of scrap. The second collar fit within four hundredths. They installed the pump around the old connector and preserved the original unit in a padded tray.

The new cryocooler trembled, settled, and became a low hum through the floor. Redundancy moved from amber to green.

Pavan rested a palm on the housing until the tremor settled beneath it. Seliath took the catalyst into separate custody. Rook kept eating his cold stew beside the new pump. The margins were still narrow, but they were real.

Emergency assignments spread across the wall. The protected off-watch interval vanished beneath installation, custody, traffic rerouting, and two failed-window reviews. The dinner entry remained, but its hour had passed.

Nera touched it with one finger. Irritation crossed her face before she could hide it.

"The invitation survived," she said. "The reservation didn't."

Trope checked the duty map. "Gallery B is open after the next sleep interval."

"I know."

"You checked."

"I wanted dinner, Trope. I'm capable of desire and scheduling at the same time."

Trope heard the edge she had earned. "I was about to make that a compliment."

"Please don't."

Pell carried the failed collar toward custody. Marr was already drafting an appeal against terms nobody had accepted. Rook had found his cold bowl and was eating beside the new pump.

Trope closed the duty map. "I still want dinner."

Nera let the irritation stay for another breath. "So do I."

They chose a new hour.

Trope almost began listing the conditions again. Nera raised one eyebrow.

Trope stopped. Nera took the grease pencil from the pump housing, crossed out the dead hour, and wrote the new one herself.

CHAPTER 10

Violet Hair

Environmental service gallery B was available for dinner because no department had designed it for comfort and none had bothered to claim it.

It had a fold-down table, two stools bolted to deck sockets, and a humidity manifold that clicked every forty-three seconds. The common room had become an evidence annex. Bridge parts occupied the galley. Every observation bay filled the moment someone needed to be alone in public. Gallery B was what remained.

Trope arrived with her meal tray under one arm and her long hair braided tight down her back. Nera was already there with two cups of galley tea.

A silver-haired technician crouched beneath the manifold, finishing a valve log. His tool case looked heavy enough to contain a personal grievance against every system on the station.

"Yellow guard stays shut," he told them. "Cryocooler control is local. Don't get curious."

"I wasn't planning to date the refrigerant," Trope said.

"People get inventive off watch." Steam rose thinly from the cups. "Tea makes that worse."

"This tea makes nothing worse," Nera said. "It has no remaining power."

The technician accepted this as expert testimony, scanned their access slates, and left. The forward door stayed unlatched.

Nera waited until his boots faded down the passage. "You gave him the reassuring answer."

"It was also true."

"I know." She handed Trope a cup. "I'm only observing that you can do reassuring when you choose."

The K-17 pump hummed through the bulkhead. It had bought time, postponed a deadline, and made future dependence easier. The larger Aster concession still lacked a signature. Both gate windows still lacked an explanation.

None of that had been invited to dinner.

Their trays held lentil protein, root mash, preserved greens, and a fruit square that had survived storage by abandoning fruit as a serious ambition. Nera lifted the table and checked both latches. Then she braced one boot against the floor rail and rocked a stool until a hidden catch snapped into place.

"You've done this before," Trope said.

"I've eaten in rooms that resented being used for food."

Trope tasted the tea. "He was right."

"About what?"

"It does increase risk."

"It's chicory."

"It's using a false name."

Nera smiled into her cup. "Don't start."

They ate for a while.

Under the white service lights, Nera's hair fell across one temple, violet over dark roots. A small ring and two studs climbed one ear. The other wore a black bar. Her nails were painted black and chipped at the edges. Solvent had eaten a clean crescent from one thumbnail.

Trope had seen all of it before. At work, those details moved with Nera's hands, her slate, the records she kept from becoming stories too quickly. Here they were close enough to stop being background.

Trope adjusted her stool even though it had not moved.

Nera put down her spoon. "What?"

"Nothing."

"You've looked at my access seal three times."

"I wasn't looking at the seal."

"My hair?"

Trope considered several answers and chose the least elaborate. "I'm trying not to stare at you."

Nera's fingers tightened around the cup. "Because of the hair?"

"Because I'm attracted to you."

For a moment Nera only blinked.

Trope added, "The attempt not to stare may be worse."

"It has the focus of an inspection."

"I noticed."

"That isn't helping."

"No."

A laugh escaped Nera before she could stop it. The last note broke off too quickly.

"Do you want to know why it's violet?" she asked.

Trope answered too quickly. "You don't owe me an explanation."

The laugh vanished.

Trope closed her eyes for half a second. "That came out wrong."

"It came out exactly as trained."

"I want to hear it. I was trying to say you get to decide whether to tell me."

"I know what you were trying to say." Nera picked up her spoon again. "Sometimes being carefully spared feels a lot like being kept outside."

Trope nodded. "Fair."

Nera took a bite of root mash, regretted it, and reached for the tea. "I choose what some people notice first. The color. The metal. The nails. I have to keep choosing them, which is part of why I like them."

She caught a dark root between two fingers.

"I missed the last color appointment because the station tried to kill us."

"The station would dispute intent."

"The station can file a statement."

Trope smiled.

"Sometimes I like the roots," Nera continued. "They show the work. Other times they show that I missed an appointment and haven't slept. Both things can be true."

She had tried silver once and ended up the color of old insulation. Three friends called it brave, which trapped her with it for nine days. The asymmetry in her piercings began because a matching ring rubbed against a comms seal. She kept the mismatch because she preferred it. The black nails needed no history beyond pleasure.

"Sometimes I catch myself in a reflective panel and think I look good," she said. "That's allowed to be enough."

"It is."

"And sometimes it's useful to learn who dislikes the color before they ask me to protect their evidence."

"That sounds like a test."

"It saves time."

Trope laughed, quietly this time.

Nera watched her. "You keep looking at my mouth."

"Yes."

"Any particular reason?"

Trope hooked both boots behind the stool rail. "I like it."

Nera waited.

"And your face. And the hair. And the piercings. And the rest of you that is currently visible."

"Currently visible?"

"I was doing well until then."

"You were doing better."

Trope felt heat move into her face. "I'm attracted to you. That's all I was trying to say."

Nera's expression softened. "I'm attracted to you too." Her gaze traveled briefly to Trope's braid, then back to her eyes. "Including the part where you turn one sentence into a hazardous operation."

The manifold clicked.

A bead of water formed beneath the lower coupling and struck the deck between them.

Nera stared at it. Another bead gathered.

"You invited a repair problem to dinner," she said.

Trope slid from the stool. "The technician changed the valve. He didn't reseat the seal."

"You know that from two drops?"

"I know where the drops are coming from."

"That's less romantic."

"It may save the food."

They folded the table upright before the third drop reached Nera's tray. A maintenance drawer held absorbent cloth, a pressure key, sealant tape, and a laminated instruction card.

Nera read the first line. "If moisture is present, do not infer harmless condensation."

Trope gave her a look.

"What?"

"You've found the machine at dinner."

Nera glanced at the card. "It has excellent boundaries."

They worked side by side. Nera held the light while Trope dried the coupling and found a strip of old seal curled beneath the washer. When Nera leaned closer, violet hair brushed Trope's sleeve.

"May I hold your hair back?" Trope asked.

"Yes."

Trope gathered the loose strands and tucked them behind Nera's ear. The hair was smooth near the roots and rougher where the color had dried it. Nera turned slightly into the touch.

The contact lasted only as long as the work needed. Trope wished the washer had been more difficult.

Nera lifted the old strip with a probe. Trope reseated the seal and restored pressure. They waited through one full forty-three-second cycle.

No water formed.

Nera signed the service card under both their names. "We repaired the room on our first date."

"Dinner."

"You're right. Dating would imply a pattern."

Trope looked at her.

Nera grinned. "I can also be annoying on purpose."

They lowered the table again. The food had cooled. The tea had not improved.

Trope looked across at Nera while she was still there to be seen. Individual violet strands caught the light. A small dent sat beside the lowest stud. Nera's jaw moved when she swallowed.

Once the door closed, Trope would keep facts, habits, words, and bodily memory. The picture itself would go.

Nera noticed the change in her attention. "Can I ask you something about that?"

"Yes."

"What am I when I'm gone?"

Trope set down her cup.

Nera went on before she could answer. "I know the basic explanation. I mean me. This hair, this room, the way I'm sitting. What happens to it?"

"The picture stops."

"All of it?"

"Yes."

Nera rubbed the bare crescent on her thumbnail. "Would a photograph help?"

"It helps while I'm looking at it."

"What stays?"

"Your name. What you've said. The way you handle evidence. The fact that you hate root mash and keep eating it anyway. Where you stand during a transfer. How your hand felt on my shoulder ring." Trope paused. "I know your hair is violet even when I can't see it. I know I want to see you again."

Nera's face changed, relief and sadness arriving together.

"And attraction?"

"That stays in my body. It isn't a picture."

"What answers me when I'm not here?"

"My best guess about you." Trope held her gaze. "Which isn't you. I still have to ask."

Nera nodded slowly. "Good."

"Good?"

"I'd rather be asked again than perfectly remembered wrong."

Trope let that settle.

Nera touched the edge of Trope's service card. "Tell me about the callsign."

Trope's shoulders tightened. Nera removed her hand.

"The legal name stays yours," she said. "I'm not asking for it."

"Farm-raised. Three brothers. Hunted crop animals. Precision military role. Dry manner. Lesbian. Attracted to women with statistically improbable hair."

Nera's mouth curved. "The evidence is troubling."

"Arlen Vos heard the list during training, moved his cup out of reach, and said, 'Oh, come on. You're a fucking trope.'"

"He waited that long?"

"He wanted enough evidence."

Trope had kept the name because it made people laugh before they could ask worse questions. It also protected her legal name and saved her from explaining the same things repeatedly.

Nera looked down at the table. "It gives people answers before they ask."

"The pattern is accurate."

"I know."

Trope heard the rest coming and braced for it.

Nera noticed. "You do that."

"What?"

"You name the pattern first. You make the joke first. You predict the refusal. Then nobody can surprise you by asking whether you want something else this time."

"The pattern keeps people from treating privacy as evidence of guilt."

"Keep it."

"It keeps embarrassment from becoming an ambush."

"Keep that too." Nera leaned forward. "I'm not trying to take it away. I'm asking whether it gets to answer for you tonight."

Trope could have defended stable preference, repeated questioning, and the way self-knowledge protected consent. Every argument was true. None answered the woman across from her.

"No," she said. "It doesn't."

The service cart outside struck a deck seam. Its driver swore, apologized to someone farther down the passage, then swore at the cart again in a quieter voice.

The manifold clicked.

Nera said, "I want to kiss you."

Trope's pulse moved into her throat.

"One kiss," Nera said. "May I?"

"Yes."

They stood and went around opposite ends of the table. They stopped a hand's width apart. One violet strand had caught against the black bar in Nera's ear.

Then Nera kissed her.

Warmth, pressure, breath. Trope tipped half a step forward and put one hand on Nera's upper arm. Nera touched the outside of Trope's shoulder, careful of the injury, not pulling her closer and not letting the contact become vague.

Trope wanted the kiss with a force that needed no image before or after it.

Nera ended it and stepped back. Her breathing had quickened.

"I wanted that," Trope said.

"So did I." Nera touched her lower lip. "The tea has been defeated."

"Low standard."

"Let me have the victory."

The archive alarm sounded through both slates.

Three descending notes marked an evidence object about to lose present custody or interpretation. Trope still felt the kiss in her mouth while Marr's seal, rack-three maintenance, and a package titled CONSENSUS ENGINE: DEMOCRATIC WILL ESTIMATE filled the display.

Nera closed her eyes. "Of course."

"Thirty-eight minutes."

"I can see it."

"Nera."

"I know." She opened her eyes. "We go."

They restored the table. Nera stacked the trays for recovery. Trope checked the coupling once more, partly because it needed checking and partly because it bought a few seconds.

At the door, Nera said, "One kiss."

"Yes."

"Dinner interrupted."

"Yes."

"We can still speak to each other in the annex like adults."

"That seems ambitious."

Nera gave her a look, and they left together.

. . .

The appeal annex had been promised to cooling maintenance before midnight. When they arrived, thirty-one minutes remained, rack three

stood open, and two technicians waited beside filters already prepared for replacement.

Marr had placed one number above the evidence table: **MARA-FIRST: 64 PERCENT.** Beneath it stood **MODELED INFORMED PREFERENCE.**

"Alectan citizens paid for the expedition, staffed it, and bear its legal consequences," he said. "Their likely view matters."

"Which citizens?" Trope asked. "What did they see?"

"The sampled public is identified in the packet."

"Did anyone vote on this question?"

"No."

Pell admitted the model as advocacy, not democratic will.

Nera fixed the raw Consensus Engine objects in custody. Then she opened the input set. Adult Alectan citizens in funding jurisdictions counted inside the number. Tahl persons, Bracken staff, noncitizen Palisade workers, and future route populations appeared only as affected parties.

The sampled citizens changed their minds, rejected premises, misunderstood chronology, and sometimes reached the same answer for incompatible reasons. Human analysts had chosen the briefing, the earlier cases, the weights, and the exclusions.

Trope watched one percentage become less solid with every screen Nera opened.

The calibration author, Anja Rell, remained under protection after an earlier model exposed her family to threats. Pell disclosed her office, method, and conflict statement while keeping her identity under independent seal.

The briefing stated the physical order correctly. It gave more space to human strategic loss and administrative coherence. Tahl strategy appeared mostly as engineered ambiguity. Co-pending governance appeared mostly as delay.

The Engine returned sixty-four percent Mara-first, twenty-four co-pending, and twelve Seliath-first.

Nera ran the same corpus with equal prominence for physical chronology, Edge's body-local risk, first-living-member doctrine, and the station's successful gray period. Mara-first fell to forty-six. Co-pending rose to thirty-nine.

"No majority," she said.

"Another authored frame," Marr replied.

"Exactly."

Marr did not retreat. Every ballot had boundaries. Every briefing compressed. A sourced model with visible uncertainty was still more accountable than intuition pretending to be common sense.

Pell agreed that it could show feasibility and likely response. "But the frame travels with the number."

The original request sat under deliberative privilege on rack three. Pell kept the privilege and drew the line: command could use a hidden frame for planning. It could not hide the frame and announce that the public had spoken.

Marr looked at both distributions. “My signature will become an easier weapon than the assumptions it authenticates.”

“It may,” Pell said. “It’s still your request.”

Mara rolled the pump collar beneath her palm. “Don’t throw out useful evidence because we can finally see who asked for it.”

Nine minutes remained. Marr ordered a bounded release of the request, its structured frame, attachments, and authentication chain. Unrelated deliberation stayed sealed.

Tal warned that cooling maintenance would lose the window.

Rima Doss reopened her tool case. “Third claim emergency this month. Three wage appeals stay in hot storage, and my partner takes the care shift I promised.”

“The hold is necessary,” Marr said.

“I know. Necessary keeps arriving after the schedule is full.”

Marr authorized the hold under his own name.

Tal and Rima released a black cartridge from rack three using separate keys. The first hash failed because retention headers had been added later. Nera stripped the container metadata from a derivative copy. The second hash matched.

The signature resolved: **JALEN MARR.**

The request asked the Engine to estimate which single ordering an informed Alectan public would authorize for claim administration, defense, diplomacy, and public chronology. It required one harmonizable answer and a legitimacy estimate.

Trope read the word again.

Harmonizable promised peace if the world would only become one body, one chronology, one public, and one answer. It was an elegant request. It was also built to dislike whatever refused to fit.

Marr still defended the complete-self reading, the Alectan reference public, and the need for an operational answer. He also insisted that the sensitivity result remain beside the first one.

Pell changed the label. **DEMOCRATIC WILL** became **MODELED SUPPORT UNDER MARR’S SUBMITTED FRAME.**

The cooling technicians rolled the replacement filters toward rack three and asked for the evidence table back. Nera closed the packet with Marr’s question, Anja Rell’s protected statement, and the sensitivity result still attached.

. . .

Their cups were still in Gallery B when they returned. Someone had collected the trays and left a note thanking them for separating food waste from bridge inventory.

The manifold clicked. Their repair had held.

The protected off-watch period had expired forty-six minutes earlier. Both women were due elsewhere soon enough that the remaining time could not honestly become dinner.

Nera tasted the cold chicory and set it down. “That was worse.”

"The temperature?"

"The timing."

The kiss still tingled in Trope's mouth. Nera stood in front of her now, violet hair mussed from work, dark roots visible, tiredness beneath both eyes.

Nera rested both hands on the table. "Stay twenty minutes."

Trope looked at her.

"Just stay," Nera said. "We can talk or not. I'm not asking for another kiss."

Trope angled her wrist display toward her. "My equipment check starts at zero five forty. It takes nine minutes to reach the locker and twenty-three to certify the suit. I need the minimum sleep interval before exterior rotation."

Nera's face changed, not closing, but withdrawing to a safer distance.

"You gave me the schedule," she said. "Not the answer."

She waited.

Trope had several answers and none of them required a calculation. She could stay. She could leave. She could want to stay and leave anyway. She could admit she did not know.

Instead she said, "Readiness drops before the formal minimum."

Nera moved the cold cup out of the way. "I understand that you're leaving."

Trope checked the coupling though it had not leaked. She latched the drawer and aligned the instruction card. Nera did not help.

At the door, Trope stopped. She wanted to say that the wanting mattered. She wanted to explain why it had not won. The explanation gathered into another careful structure and died before she spoke it.

"Good night," Nera said.

"Good night."

The door latched between them. Behind it, the manifold clicked once and kept counting.

Trope stayed in the corridor until the next click, then went to certify her suit.

CHAPTER 11

The Rule as Written

The protection order prevented Edge from leaving the machine built to prove that Edge had arrived.

With a custody tone mild enough to mean tea was ready, the old first-arrival module announced this. A green line crossed the habitat display.

PROTECTED CLAIMANT-EVIDENCE CONFIGURATION: CONTINUOUS CUSTODY REQUIRED.

Edge pulled once against the inner restraint rail. The rail took her weight.

The shell had carried one Tahl voice through the gate on narrowed reserves and an advantage measured in eighty-four seconds. It preserved the first waking, the first thirst, a hidden resistance in the feed control, and the claim burst by which a living body entered human law before human law knew what body it had received. The module had been designed to arrive, not to be lived in.

Edge lay folded inside it, four load-bearing limbs under the ribs, finer forelimbs braced against controls worn smooth by the crossing. The restraint band warmed across conductive tissue near the shoulder.

Trope stood alone inside the body-near privacy boundary. Seliath had agreed to reconstruct the mission before the account became useful to anyone else. Passive instruments retained atmosphere, pressure, location, and agreed emergency signs. Nothing mapped private exchange.

Outside, a reinforced cradle waited on a custody cart with one bad wheel and a twenty-six-minute corridor interval. A nutrient tanker idled behind it, then two radiator crews with their helmets clipped to their belts and the look of people already calculating which meal they would miss. The cart could wait. The corridor could not become private because Trope had asked an important question.

Edge tested the rail again, more slowly.

"Do not pull harder," Trope said.

"This voice had not mistaken resistance for uncertainty."

Bridge spoke through the translator from the far side of the room. Depth lay along the exchange surface, one flank resting against the conductive plane where Seliath could choose contact while the room remained outside whatever passed through it. Neither body approached the module.

Trope opened the release path. The custody interface offered three lawful options: present a Witness custody key, wait for the cart team, or declare a claimant-protection exception that would break continuous custody over the living configuration. The cart team was nine minutes away. The corridor interval had eleven minutes remaining, and the transfer itself required six.

Trope kept one hand on the release control. "The band is below injury threshold."

Depth lifted from the exchange surface. "That sentence describes the band."

Bridge's translator hesitated, then rendered the rest. "It does not describe Edge."

Trope read the pressure load, the heat beneath the band, the angle of Edge's shoulder, and the tremor beginning in one fine forelimb. The rule separated body loss, continuity fracture, evidence destruction, and uncertainty into four careful fields. The station beneath it was older and less intelligent. It knew how to protect one thing at a time, so Edge and the module had been forced into the same row. The prose was careful. The latch was not.

Trope shifted from the rule fields to Edge. "Can this body remain nine minutes without damage?"

No commitment light appeared.

Edge answered body-local. "This body can remain."

Depth said, "This body should not have to remain because a record fears being left alone."

The translator chose *fears*. Trope did not correct it.

Calling the custodians through the boundary would end the private interval at the exact point Seliath had agreed to reconstruct under constrained access. Waiting would preserve the rule. Edge could endure nine more minutes; the rail would remain legal while she did. Trope watched the tremor travel once through the folded limb and stopped pretending endurance made the delay empty.

Trope selected **CLAIMANT-PROTECTION EXCEPTION**.

The reason field allowed thirty-two characters.

She entered **LIVING BODY NOT AN EVIDENCE CONTAINER**. The final word did not fit. The interface proposed **EVIDENCE UNIT** instead.

Trope rejected the proposal, expanded the field under her own authority, and entered the sentence again.

She documented the expected custody gap, the module state that might be lost, the route delay, the people whose work would move into the night, and the fact that release conferred no title decision. Then she rotated the manual key.

The restraint withdrew.

Edge backed out quickly until cramped limbs met the habitat floor. One forelimb stayed folded near the shoulder while circulation returned. The local custody envelope ended at a yellow line three body lengths from the module. When Edge crossed it, the station produced a second soft tone.

CLAIMANT-EVIDENCE SEPARATION. VERIFY CONTINUITY.

Edge moved on.

The confirmation field wanted a category: removed, stolen, substituted, medically abandoned, strategically withdrawn, or lost. Edge had walked out under her own power. The field offered no answer for that. It had been

written to fear distance between claimant and module, and now every legal consequence of that distance stood waiting behind the yellow line.

Depth met Edge at the exchange surface. Bridge released the translator and joined them. Their bodies touched in a shifting geometry that had no ceremonial symmetry and required none. The commitment marker went dark.

PRIVATE EXCHANGE: NOT RECORDED.

Outside, the custody cart lost its route interval. The nutrient tanker took the throat. Odel and the second custodian rolled the cradle back toward archive junction, the bad wheel complaining at every seam. A route clerk sent the consequence into Trope's queue: transfer after local midnight; one portable shock frame unavailable for another recovery; two workers returning after shifts already stretched by the claims hearing.

The notice carried no blame. It carried names, hours, and equipment, which was harder to ignore.

Trope accepted the delay under her own name and left the box marked unavoidable empty. She had signed the order that made body and record one object. The machine had merely been loyal.

Edge's folded forelimb loosened by degrees. Depth adjusted contact near the shoulder, then along the flank. Bridge stayed joined until the amber strip on the abandoned rail cooled to green. Trope could see pressure and position. The rest belonged to Seliath, and the dark commitment marker was enough to tell her something was happening beyond her access.

The habitat door requested entry.

Pell Aran appeared on the exterior panel beside Nera and the senior cart custodian, Odel Hart. Pell's station tea occupied the lower corner of his remote frame, dark enough to have acquired a surface tension argument of its own. Nera wore evidence gloves and had disciplined her face into work. The distance left by the previous night's unanswered request had traveled with them.

Odel stood beside the cart with one hand on the bad wheel. He had a narrow face, a repair patch at one elbow, and the resigned patience of a man who had spent twenty years moving objects after other people had declared them too important to touch incorrectly.

Trope did not open the body-near boundary. She opened a speech channel.

"Exception executed," she said. "Edge is free of the restraint. Module state remains undisturbed except for rail release. Continuous custody is broken."

"We noticed," Odel said. The bad wheel turned half a degree under his hand and gave a small, aggrieved squeak. "The station's sent me four messages about the custody break and one about this wheel. The wheel message is older."

Pell checked the dark commitment marker beyond Trope. "Is Seliath able to review the discussion?"

"When Seliath chooses."

"Then I will stay outside." He brought the rule onto the shared panel. "Do you understand what you broke?"

"The rail."

Nera's eyes shifted toward her.

Trope went on before the answer could become a joke. "I broke the only implementation holding Edge's body, Seliath's standing, the first-arrival hardware, and the authentication root in one claimant row."

Pell nodded once. "Good. Start there."

They had written the rule during the three hours after the provisional-standing hearing, when six systems needed an answer before rollover. The public record called the implementation orderly. Odel, who had pushed the first cart through it while three departments argued over which door counted, remembered differently.

"Archive saw the module," he said. "Medical saw the body. Security protected whichever one sat on the right coordinate. Title followed the authentication root. Transit followed the cart because transit has the good sense to respect mass."

Nera replayed the failure. The moment Edge left the module, security renamed her **UNVERIFIED BIOLOGICAL PRESENCE**. If the module moved without her, archive preserved standing inside an **ORPHANED CLAIMANT OBJECT**. Appeal followed the record. Consent stayed with the body.

"That split existed before anyone threatened to exploit it," Pell said. "We couldn't rebuild the station before rollover. Rook needed something the systems would obey."

Nera touched the compound label with one gloved finger. "The hyphen isn't theology. It's scar tissue. We made claimant-evidence one noun because the table gave us one row."

Odel had solved the problem with a cart. Body and machine traveled together, so security could not protect one while archive misplaced the other. The same solution put Edge under the cart's authority.

"You signed the finding," Trope said.

"I did."

"I signed the order."

"You did." Pell did not soften it for her. "The order blocked a real form of den-theft. It also restrained Edge. I'm not going to lie about either half."

"Neither am I."

That agreement left them with the part nobody could solve by confession. Legacy systems still needed an executable rule, and the same route that carried protection could carry an attacker. Deleting the order would only hand the blank field to whoever reached it first.

The commitment marker lit. Bridge returned to the translator while Edge remained in contact with Depth.

"The rule protected Seliath from separation by human systems," Bridge said. "It also performed separation by treating Edge as the movable edge of an evidence object."

"Accepted," Pell said.

"Do you defend it?" Edge asked.

Pell took long enough that the tea in his remote frame stopped steaming. "I defend why we wrote it. A splint can keep a limb together while everything is breaking. I don't defend leaving it on after it cuts circulation."

"The splint did not notice circulation."

"No. People had to."

Trope opened the revision field and began separating what the old row had crushed together. Seliath was the claimant. Edge was the living voice whose body had crossed first, with body-local memory, choice, pain, and authority over what happened to that body. The module, authentication root, traces, and committed records were evidence. None of them could own the person beside them.

Odel made them translate every sentence into cart work. If Edge left during transfer, the cart stopped and the module stayed. If the module became unsafe, evidence authority could move it. If Edge lost consciousness, medical authority followed the body and custody stopped at skin.

Nera tied continuity protection to the exchange paths and commitments Seliath actually identified. Private exchange stayed private. Surviving voices could preserve facts and commitments without being declared a restoration of what one body lost. Pell limited evidence custody to hardware, copies, traces, and committed testimony. It could preserve a claim; it could not decide title or turn proximity into possession.

The new order needed more verbs, more alerts, and at least one additional human being on every transfer. Odel read it twice, then rubbed the repair patch at his elbow.

"This is going to make the cart procedure ugly."

"The old procedure was ugly inside the body," Edge said.

Odel looked at Edge, then at the wheel under his hand. "All right. The document can catch up."

They kept the old order beside the revision, complete with its purpose, signatures, success, harm, and the body it had restrained. Pell authenticated the change. Odel accepted the midnight route without pretending he liked it. Nera locked the records apart so the cleaner version could never erase the first.

Before closing the channel, Nera looked directly at Trope. "The expanded reason field remains."

"It was too small."

"I know." Nera's voice stayed inside the work. "It should've been larger before you needed it."

The panel darkened.

Seliath remained joined at the exchange surface for another minute. Bridge returned to the translator only after Edge separated from Depth and tested the shoulder with a cautious fraction of her weight.

"You changed the rule."

"It was wrong where it touched you."

Edge held the shoulder above the floor. "Wrong enough to restrain a body."

"Yes."

The commitment indicator lit. "Accepted."

Trope loaded the mission packet under Seliath's privacy limits. Archive, present testimony, Edge's body-local memory, and origin confirmation remained separate. The last field stayed empty. The Tahl gate was inactive; no distant authority could arrive in time to make the local account complete.

She placed Marr's named Consensus question beside the first-arrival rule. "What words did you believe you could satisfy?"

Bridge enlarged the phrase in both languages.

FIRST LIVING MEMBER.

"Life," Trope said. "Membership."

"Not your preferred geometry of a person," Bridge replied.

The exterior-law memorandum allowed one living voice to count as one living member under Tahl continuity law. Its dissent anticipated the human objection: incomplete embodiment, no settled residence, no single body carrying the whole person's death. The analysis stopped before mass allocation and launch.

"Seliath proposed the act," Bridge said. "Claimant-mission authority approved aperture mass, fabrication, support, and launch."

"Did it request this configuration?"

"No."

"Reward earlier sequence?"

"Yes."

"Could you have refused?"

The three bodies entered finite exchange. The module fan whined; a pump shifted speed; beyond the wall, Odel's wheel complained its way toward archive junction. Forty-one seconds passed before Bridge returned.

"Seliath volunteered and proposed the one-voice plan," Bridge said. "No surviving record shows compulsion. The dead gate also prevents missing coercion evidence from becoming proof of perfect freedom."

Edge stopped at the yellow line and drove the feed control past its easy detent until hidden resistance caught.

"That stop is absent from the diagram," Trope said.

"It migrated after seal cure." Edge stopped the control there. "The archive has the motion, not the pressure. Depth can state the time. Bridge can state why correction mattered. This body remembers how hard it resisted, where thirst first appeared, and which limb shook."

During exchange, Depth could reach part of that memory. Edge carried it without needing another body to hand it back.

The mass ledger showed where the eighty-four seconds came from. They had cut broad medical reserve, duplicate life support, full exchange bandwidth, comfort volume, and most of the machinery that would have made autobiographical indexes easy to reach.

The body that crossed was built for immediate sensorimotor focus, local controls, and isolated action. It was a mission configuration, not a permanent caste.

"Did Edge decide?" Trope asked.

"Edge favored the mission," Edge said.

"Depth objected," Depth said. "Unique memory and future capacity could be lost beyond restoration."

Bridge added, "Every safer package arrived after Mara or surrendered the firstness test." Then, before Trope could hear the three answers as a vote, Bridge said, "These are positions. Seliath is not three people counting hands."

Trope replayed the prelaunch exchange at its original speed. Translation had made Edge's quick sentences arrive first, Depth's qualifications seem late, and Bridge's attempt to carry both sound like interruption. The timing had given the disagreement a shape it had not possessed.

"A full package loses sequence," Edge had said.

"Sequence is not worth making one site carry irreplaceable loss," Depth had answered.

Bridge had named the actual choice: early sequence with concentrated failure, later sequence under human control, or refusal of the claim strategy.

"Then record concentrated failure," Edge had said.

"Record thirst," Depth replied. "Record narrowed memory. Record that surviving is not restoration."

The voices entered finite integration without losing the disagreement. Depth's objection traveled into the commitment, and the mission signature fixed the act as Seliath's choice rather than the victory of one body over two.

"Why preserve disagreement after commitment?" Trope asked.

"Decision changes what Seliath will do," Bridge said. "It does not make the rejected costs unreal."

After the module sealed, Edge retained body-local halt authority. A refusal there would have paused launch even if Seliath still preferred the mission, because pain, isolation, and possible voice death would arrive in that body first.

"Did you reaffirm?"

"Yes," Edge said.

Bridge gave the reason for the two signatures. Seliath could not leave all authorship with the body nearest danger, and person-level consent could not silence the body that would suffer first.

The open restraint rail exposed another failure in Trope's protection work, one that had nothing to do with old software.

The mission sought recognition, first-flag advantage, route influence, and a direct challenge to human assumptions about where a person ended. One planning note expected a separated living voice to force human security into protection, exclusion, or lethal uncertainty. The tactic needed Edge to survive, but it also drew leverage from disagreement over what Edge's death would mean.

"You used our hesitation," Trope said. "You made one body a legal weapon."

The commitment light appeared quickly.

"All first claimants are legal acts performed with bodies," Seliath said. "Some arrive wearing familiar anatomy and are called settlement."

"Mara carried medical reserve. Her claim didn't depend on making everyone argue over whether her death counted."

"The strategies are not identical."

"You put the irreversible loss in Edge because the rest of Seliath would survive elsewhere."

The light went dark. The three bodies joined while the clean mission columns waited on the wall.

When Seliath returned, the first correction was precise. "Withdraw *safer*."

Trope did.

"If Edge had died, Seliath would have died there and lived elsewhere. The surviving voices would inherit an absence that could never become the lost configuration. Survival was distributed. Safety was not."

Trope entered **SURVIVING ELSEWHERE** and preserved the original.

"The consent was real," Trope said. "That keeps Edge from becoming a pawn in our account. It doesn't remove the tactic or what it asked of everyone else."

"Consent prevents pawn," Bridge said. "Strategy remains."

"And so do Mara, the workers, the guards, and every route user who never consented to be part of it."

"Seliath accepts answerability to them. Seliath does not accept a rewritten phrase because humans disliked the body that satisfied it."

The revised order now kept body, continuity, and evidence apart. Any person who opened the readable protection map would leave a name behind.

Bridge said, "Keep *legal weapon* if you need it. Seliath chose that function. Do not mistake the function for the whole person."

"Edge remembers, chooses, suffers, and remains Seliath beyond what the mission used."

"Accepted."

"Marr's frame doesn't excuse your plan."

"Your plan does not excuse his frame."

Trope nearly said she had no plan. The amber band, the deferred cart, the widened reason field, and both signed versions of the order remained in the room to contradict her.

"My rule restrained Edge."

"Yes."

"I changed the part I could reach."

"Yes."

Before Trope left, Edge crossed the yellow line back toward the module. The custody interface asked whether custody had been restored. Trope waited.

"No evidence duty," Edge said, settling one forelimb on the scarred rim. "This is where pressure became a place. The other voices know the sequence. This body knows the resistance."

The controller still treated custody and choice as the same state. Trope entered Edge's reason and let the marker change.

Under the new rule, Edge could leave. She stayed because the place belonged to her memory before it belonged to evidence.

. . .

The Cairnward observation post had been designed for two people who did not own elbows. Mills crouched beneath the dead heater with a screwdriver between his teeth, swore softly when the panel bit his knuckle, and tried the relay again. Each repair lasted long enough to smell hot before the unit died. Beyond the armor glass, a laundry bladder turned one damp sleeve through the work lights.

"Third resurrection," Mills said.

"It's died three times."

"Exactly. Resurrection requires commitment."

Trope kept the revised protection derivative beside the route hook she had drawn after the rule review. Edge's body, Seliath's exchange continuity, and the first-arrival archive now had separate lines. They bent toward one another in the service shadow, where a valid route could become a mistake, an emergency, or an attack before the station found the right noun.

At the old module, Edge inspected a restraint housing abrading its protective sleeve while a Tahl maintenance organism packed mineral paste into a seal crack. Depth tended nutrient exchange inside the habitat; Bridge had taken the translator to legal review. One person remained busy in three bodies.

"The sleeve is cut too close," Edge said over the committed service channel.

"That sentence has wounded the installer," Mills said.

"The installer is absent."

"Then I'll recover."

The new rule freed Edge. It also showed every authorized worker exactly where body, authentication root, and service route came close enough to help one another. The road for aid and the road for harm were the same road until somebody chose what to carry down it.

Alectan Thermal Service Sled T-17 arrived with the correct passive beacon. Senior Custodian Nia Kelm handled the controls; Lieutenant Marek Soll rode under the escort rule for Alectan work near disputed claimant space.

"T-17," Kelm called, "R-3 inspection, then W-7, then home before my shift turns into tomorrow."

"I've entered your optimism as unverified," Mills said.

"Enter my supervisor as the cause."

Kelm's signature on the work order was valid. She serviced R-3 with the irritated speed of someone who had done the same repair too many times, shoved the automatic brace aside, and made Soll hold the plate while she tested the line. The pale pressure scar above his glove belonged to the same competent body that had earned a breach citation. The washer was genuinely worn. The reported oscillation was not.

A patrol drone swept the sled and challenged the compact mass beneath the thermal rack. Field collar, cutter, induction driver, portable buffer: every tool was authorized for frozen-line recovery. Their identities, power states, and posture fit the work order. The drone asked the correct questions of the wrong arrangement and moved on.

"Your ugly little fish," Mills said, tapping Trope's route hook.

"Hook."

"It has ambitions."

T-17 detached toward W-7, behaved correctly for four seconds, then killed outward translation and rolled inward along C-2B, the narrow service throat behind the radiator backplane. Two workers waited in a recessed cage while their dose clock ran.

The station marked a route exception. The word *attack* had no field yet.

Trope linked the sled, the throat, Edge, and the authentication root. The rack mass no longer matched the open inspection; its contents had compacted into a braced asymmetric load, and the buffer was charging beyond diagnostic need.

"T-17, stop translation. Cut tool power. Identify the exception."

"Traffic conflict," Kelm said. "Taking the inner throat for a controlled turn."

"The inner throat is not a turn bay. Stop."

Soll spoke close to the pickup. "We are not approaching the habitat interior."

"You are approaching a protected claimant and protected evidence through an unlisted route."

The sled acknowledged receipt and kept moving. Kelm's genuine credential opened the lock exactly as designed. The lock had no way to know that a valid person with valid authority had brought an invalid purpose.

Rook seized command. "Deviation, noncompliance, incompatible endpoint. Rifle release under claimant-protection authority. Mills, side lock. Trope, observation line. I own the intervention pending review."

The cabinet unsealed. The heater woke behind them and blew one breath of scorched dust across the post.

T-17 aligned its belly with the first-arrival service spine. Kelm dropped the sled's stabilizers. Soll released the thermal rack.

The thermal rack opened. Tools came out one by one and locked together until the work sled had become something else.

Beneath the module, the induction driver spun. The shaping collar spread around the external exchange spine. A zeroization probe extended toward the claimant-authentication port, and a thermal cutter aligned behind it with guide pins matching the old module's service holes. Power buses locked along a manual firing rail between Soll's hands.

Nothing had needed a disguise. Every component could perform legitimate work somewhere else, and Kelm had used several of them for legitimate work minutes earlier. In this arrangement they could injure Edge, sever exchange, cut the authentication root, and poison whatever evidence remained.

Edge pulled free of the restraint housing. The maintenance organism flattened against the module rim. Its paste tube drifted loose and struck the hull in slow, soft taps.

Trope addressed both of them by name over the channel. "Lieutenant Marek Soll. Senior Service Custodian Nia Kelm. Release frame power, withdraw from the controls, and move clear of the module."

Kelm shouted across the sled to Soll. "The collar is not seated."

"Seat it."

"If the spine twists, the driver will arc through us."

"Then keep it straight."

Her fingers locked around the brace and did not slip.

Trope said, "You can still stop. You don't surrender any claim, office, or unrelated right by taking your hands off that frame. You are threatening a protected claimant and protected evidence."

Soll studied the old module through the sled glass. "That distinction is how they take it."

"Name your authority."

"This is species defense."

The common record caught the sentence.

Soll brought the induction driver above standby. "If that body carries first arrival, the Tahl get route authority. Settlement comes next. Defense comes after that. Children born here inherit an alien decision because everyone with rank wanted a clean record instead of a necessary act."

"No attack order is authenticated," Trope said.

"Orders are how institutions keep their hands clean."

Kelm checked the rising field load. "Marek."

"You knew the sequence."

"I know the collar. It is still half a degree high."

"Correct it."

She corrected it.

The zeroization probe armed. Soll pulled the firing rail out of safe detent.

Edge struck the collar with one forelimb. The whole frame rang against the service spine. Kelm swore and drove her shoulder into the brace while Soll braked the rail short of first stage.

"Remove it," Edge said through the low-bandwidth channel.

Trope's reticle tracked Soll's upper body. He had the means, the position, and the preparation. He had not yet crossed the act that opened her safe line. Her fear could ready the shot; it could not authorize it.

"Release the rail," she said.

Soll pushed it forward.

The driver discharged with a sound too low for the observation glass and high enough to enter through the rest, the rifle stock, and Trope's teeth. White instrument glare swept across the external spine. Edge's limbs locked. The forelimb against the collar slipped, struck the module, and buckled beneath the body.

The service channel caught four committed words before the signal tore apart.

"Pressure first. Heat second."

Then nothing from Edge.

Alarms flooded the atmosphere feed. Respiratory control fell out of rhythm. One anterior manipulator stopped answering. The exchange map lost its return path through the band that had carried Edge's first waking, thirst, feed correction, and first successful contact with Depth. The pulse had struck the place where a local body met the wider person, and normal exchange vanished with it.

Kelm stared at Edge. Her grip on the brace loosened.

Soll caught the rail before it reset to safe. "Hold it."

"We did the body stage."

"The claim root remains."

"Edge is down," Trope said. "Release the firing rail now."

Soll heard her. His face angled toward the observation aperture, then back toward the stage-two detent. His left hand shielded the control. His body blocked the only limb line. The charged frame denied every safe shot into the machinery. The upper-thoracic line missed Edge, the authentication root, and Kelm.

He pushed.

Trope fired once.

The rifle drove into her shoulder. Soll tore away from the rail and struck the rear restraint hard enough to open it. His hand released the control. The rail reset short of stage two.

Kelm made a sound that was not his name. She released the collar brace and stretched across his body for the independent bypass.

Mills emerged from the side lock below the sled. "Nia, stop."

Her fingers curled against the bypass guard.

Mills's low-impulse round broke the upper-arm suit-assist joint. The mechanism locked with Kelm's hand six centimeters from the control. Her pressure envelope held. She stayed conscious and fought the dead assistance while Mills crossed the remaining distance, isolated the secondary circuit, and clipped her restraint line to the sled.

"Do not move the shoulder," he said.

Kelm bypassed him and asked Soll, "Is he dead?"

Mills tested Soll's pulse while holding the control lock. "Yes."

She shut her eyes once. When she refocused on the room, she said, "The buffer is still live. Ground the blue bus before you cut the collar."

He bent over the indicated lead. "Is that true?"

"Yes."

Trope traced the charge path from the post. "Confirmed. Blue bus first."

Rook named the scene a claimant-protection medical and evidence emergency. The classification opened only the access needed for Edge's care, device isolation, and scene custody. It exposed none of the remaining habitat and decided no title. Before either weapon cooled, Rook put his own name over Trope's lethal shot and Mills's disabling one.

Medical crews converged from two directions. A Tahl care team gained contact with Edge through the body-near boundary while human technicians grounded the blue bus outside it. The maintenance organism clung to the module rim until a Tahl handler worked it free, the paste tube still trailing from one forelimb like a tool forgotten during an evacuation.

Edge needed immediate support. The exchange tissue was badly damaged, and no accessible signal remained from the body-local band running from first waking through first reintegration. Depth and Bridge still held facts and commitments. They did not hold Edge's first-person pressure, thirst, resistance, or learned movement at the controls.

Through the two available bodies, Seliath committed to care, device custody, and protection review under narrowed continuity. Neither voice called the surviving common record a restoration.

A clinic relay connected for six seconds. Edge's words broke through respiratory support.

"Do not name intact elsewhere as returned here."

The relay disconnected before anyone could reply.

Stage one had scarred the authentication interface but left it intact. Stage two stopped short. Stage three never wrote its contamination pattern. Witness copies still held chronology and provenance.

The first search found Trope's readable protection derivative on Soll's offline package, stripped down to route lines. His own credential had exposed claimant-threat material, and a standing security entitlement supplied the rest. He had needed no forged token or false superior identity. He copied the package to Kelm.

Kelm had written the false coolant report and the work order. Soll's notes supplied the staging sequence, first-arrival root, and continuity-disruption steps; her acknowledgments covered transport, clamp access, and bypass duty. In one private note he called first arrival the hinge of human route survival and wrote that command would never do what must be done. He named no superior. No order traveled with the sentence.

Rook froze the relevant service and security entitlements, then reopened heat, medicine, and movement through named exceptions. Marr transferred command records and said there was no attack order on the command channel.

Nera created an authorization field.

"Search produced no order," Trope said.

"Not finding an order and proving none was given are different findings," Nera said.

"Authorization unknown."

Nera logged it.

Hours later, the Cairnward heater worked perfectly. No one had touched it since Mills left.

Edge survived under intensive support and could not enter normal exchange. Through Depth and Bridge, Seliath asked for one committed question. The indicator remained dark long enough for Trope to hear the pump behind the wall before it lit.

"Did you save a person or evidence?"

The rifle bruise had begun to stiffen her shoulder. Beyond the glass, the laundry bladder moved back along the service tether with the same damp sleeve turning in the work lights.

"I stopped stage two."

"That was not the question."

"No." The sleeve rotated between them. "It's the only answer I have."

CHAPTER 12

The Dead Person's Species

The board outside intensive care had been designed for pressure accidents. It knew three conditions: alive, dead, and transferred. Someone had added a fourth line in grease pencil because the software would not accept what had happened to Edge.

MAREK SOLL: DEAD.

NIA KELM: ALIVE, STABILIZED, IN CUSTODY.

EDGE: ALIVE, CRITICAL.

Beneath that, in Pell's narrow hand:

FIRST-ARRIVAL BAND INACCESSIBLE. DO NOT RECORD AS RESTORED.

The sentence leaned uphill. Pell had written it while the habitat was correcting spin after the service-sled shutdown, one palm braced against the wall and a dead man passing behind him toward the mortuary lock.

Inside the clinic, a pump corrected Edge's blood chemistry in small pulses. Every seventh pulse came late and lifted an amber warning along the regulator. The human respiratory technician reached toward the controls each time, then stopped herself because the body-near Tahl clinician could see pressures she could not. The clinician named the setting. Her human counterpart narrowed the feed. A second worker picked up the standard mineral carrier, read the substrate warning, muttered "wrong body," and returned it to the tray.

Species lived in those motions. It changed the drug, the sealant, the pressure limit, and the shape of the hand that could reach the coupling. It could keep a body alive. It could not tell the room what that life was worth.

Depth and Bridge occupied separate support rooms under narrowed exchange. They could commit speech, receive care instructions, and answer when Edge permitted. The induction pulse had burned through the body-local return path they once reached. Logs still held the first waking, pressure changes, feed corrections, the failed control movement, and the first successful contact with Depth. History kept the sequence beyond the reach of the body that had lived it.

At the public-record terminal, Nera was losing the dead man by the minute.

The first Alectan notice called Marek Soll a traitor to the uniform. The second called him a compromised security asset. A memorial draft from an account with no mortuary authority and no patience for chronology named him the man who died defending human continuity. Seventeen private channels copied the title before Nera found the source, and three had already added photographs.

She opened the force record beside it. "They've taken his last sentence before stage one and built the whole man out of it."

Trope read the draft once. It was beautifully arranged. Pell's sentence about duty sat at the exact hinge where Soll's motive became sacrifice.

"Put the order back," she said.

Nera waited.

"Start with the first stop order," Trope said. "Then his refusal, stage one, Edge's injury, the final order, his hand moving toward stage two, and the shot."

Nera entered the sequence in plain verbs. The memorial still stood, but now the reader could see what it had climbed over to get there.

Translated Tahl traffic offered its own finished stories. One message called the attack human nature. Another called it the human answer to distributed personhood. Both crossed the same network through which a human technician was holding Edge's respiratory line steady for a Tahl clinician whose forelimbs did not fit the emergency coupling.

Trope added the names of those who had opposed the attack and those treating its wound. She did not offer them as proof of human goodness. The network carried Soll's sentence and the clinic settings at the same time. Human species was too large a noun for either act.

Captain Ors Venn arrived from Alectan command before the next clinic alarm. He had removed his sidearm, kept his uniform jacket, and looked as if both decisions had cost him sleep. The preliminary finding on his slate read:

UNAUTHORIZED ACTOR. COMPROMISED SECURITY ASSET.

The second phrase reduced Soll to failed hardware. "He wasn't a failed component."

"It means we can't trust his access anymore."

"He chose the access. He copied the protection package, recruited Kelm, heard two orders, and ignored both."

Venn's face tightened. "The phrase also separates what he did from command."

"Then say that. Don't turn authorship into malfunction because a dead officer is inconvenient."

Nera split the working account into four columns: what Soll authored, what his office gave him, what access made possible, and what any superior had authorized. The first three filled with names, credentials, and movement. The fourth stayed gray.

"We haven't found an order," Venn said.

"Put that in the field," Trope said. "Don't make it the answer."

The clinic alarm sounded once. The respiratory technician asked for a narrower regulator. The Tahl clinician gave the setting, and the second technician passed over the compatible carrier. The amber strip faded slowly, like a bruise thinking better of itself.

Pell came through the mortuary lock carrying a transfer slate with both hands. "The body system won't accept custody without species."

Nobody answered. The sentence was too clean for the corridor between Edge's clinic and Soll's body.

Pell turned the slate toward them. "Atmosphere, tissue hazard, seal chemistry, decomposition control, return-container limits. Here it's a material field."

Trope selected **HUMAN**.

The slate accepted the answer and advanced.

IDENTITY OF DECEASED.

"Marek Soll," she said.

Human told the mortuary how to keep Soll's body. It told them nothing about what Marek Soll had chosen.

The clinic opened a statement window after Edge's regulator held for twelve minutes. The channel could carry one committed phrase at a time. Depth and Bridge were allowed to answer only when Edge asked, so everyone else had to learn the difference between silence and an invitation to fill it.

Edge asked for the first-arrival sequence.

Depth gave pressure first. Bridge supplied the clock relation. Between them came heat, thirst, control resistance, feed loss, correction, authentication, the claim burst, and the first successful exchange that reopened the wider Seliath index. The facts matched the module logs, but now they arrived in the voices of people who remembered them.

Edge listened.

When the clinician reopened the channel, Edge said, "All true. They arrive as testimony about a life that is mine."

Bridge's support body shifted against the far side of the boundary. "Seliath retains the commitments."

"Do not improve the sentence."

Bridge's exchange membrane went still. Across the clinic, the respiratory technician lowered the next question without being asked.

The clinician gave the prognosis in ordinary words. The pulse had destroyed the body-local autobiographical return path. Surviving tissue might learn new coordination, and Edge might recover control of the damaged anterior manipulator. No available treatment could make first arrival become lived possession in this body again.

Trope felt an analogy reach for her and stopped it. She had never possessed an inner image to lose. Edge had possessed pressure, thirst, resistance, and contact through a body-local route. Someone had taken that route away.

Edge oriented one eye cluster toward her. "You cannot summon what you retain."

"No."

"This body cannot reach what it once could."

"No."

"Yours was absent from the beginning. Mine was taken."

"No."

Heat from the source display climbed into Nera's sleeves. "The record can prove the band existed. It can preserve every source around it. It can't give Edge back the part that now arrives in another voice."

She stayed there until the next clinic alarm sounded.

The mortuary suite waited one pressure lock away. It smelled of sealant, soap, and the metallic water that came through old pipes after a spin correction. The floor sloped toward a drain. Two shroud cartridges warmed beside the body table while Aro Fen, senior technician on shift, fought with a printer that accepted Soll's identity and rejected the apostrophe in the custody office's name.

"The dead continue their campaign against punctuation," Fen said, not looking up.

Pell reached past him and entered the office code without the apostrophe.

The printer fed out the label. "Cowardice," Fen said.

Then he turned to the transfer slate, and the humor left on its own.

Neutral Witness custody would last until incident evidence had been separated. Alectan personnel could observe the examination but could not reclaim Soll before Pell certified the body. Seliath could submit relevant questions and receive findings. The body would not become compensation, an object of punishment, or a species ritual. Kelm would receive lawful case information later, after live testimony and evidence review.

Fen confirmed the human atmosphere profile. "Flag attachment?"

"No political marks," Pell said.

"Witness seal?"

"Custody only."

Fen addressed Venn. "Rank?"

"Lieutenant."

"Rank belongs on the identity line," Pell said. "Honor is not decided here."

Fen wrote **MAREK SOLL, LIEUTENANT** on the shroud label. His handwriting was broad and unlovely, made to survive cold storage, hurried transfer, and the next tired person's mistake.

Behind the privacy screen, Trope aligned the rifle record, frame telemetry, and a reconstruction reduced to motion and time. The examiner did not ask her to look at Soll again. When he needed the firing line, she gave him her position, Soll's movement, the upper-thoracic coordinate, the rail, and the exclusion lines around Edge, Kelm, and the authentication root.

"Did you observe death immediately?"

"I observed loss of purposeful movement. Mills confirmed death at the sled."

"Could stage two have completed without the shot?"

"I can't certify a future that didn't occur. I can certify that he was moving the rail toward the detent and that the shot moved him away from it."

The examination confirmed identity, fatal injury, trajectory, and residue from the den-theft frame. Body displacement and telemetry agreed about what the shot had done. Nothing else justified opening more of Soll for curiosity.

Bridge submitted Seliath's questions. Residue on the gloves: present. Position between manual rail and observation post: confirmed. Time from stage one to final movement: reported with instrument uncertainty rather than rounded into a cleaner act.

The Tahl evidence representative requested the complete scan set.

Pell refused. "You receive incident findings and the custody path."

"He attacked Seliath."

"He did. His body is not compensation."

Venn asked for the body as soon as the examination ended.

"You receive him after evidence separation and neutral care."

"Neutral care can become theater."

"So can haste."

Pell's answer left the disagreement alive. Venn stayed through the washing. The Tahl representative remained on the remote panel. Each watched the ordinary work deny the use they had brought to the body.

Fen and a second technician removed non-evidentiary residue, washed Soll's skin, covered the wound, and fitted the pressure-stable shroud. They used the same practiced care they gave coolant burns, failed seals, and workers recovered too late from exterior maintenance. One had spent the previous hour carrying Tahl-compatible cartridges into Edge's clinic. Now both eased human shroud material beneath the shoulder of the man who had injured Edge so the seam would not bunch during return.

"Next of kin's incomplete," Fen said. "Three names and no live route."

Nera opened the verified personnel file.

Marek Soll, forty-two, Alectan citizen, seventeen years in security and expedition protection. Nine years earlier he had entered a failing pressure compartment and brought three people out alive. The citation recorded the hatch, pressure at entry, two return trips after his suit sprang a leak, and the names of the three survivors. Maintenance and medical logs confirmed it.

Venn read the citation over Nera's shoulder. His posture lost its command shape.

"That's the officer I knew."

"It's one true thing he did," Trope said.

"And this is another."

"Yes."

Nera read the family names. "Halie Soll, mother. Brin Soll, younger sister. Oren Soll, nephew."

Fen entered the names into a restricted notification packet: identity, death, force chronology, custody, open investigation. The packet could not leave while both gates were inactive.

"Subject line?" he asked. "Deceased Lieutenant Marek Soll?"

"Yes."

"Traitor?"

"No."

"Martyr?"

"No."

Fen nodded. "Good. The mortuary software has enough ambitions."

Trope and Mills completed equipment accountability in a service room with two rifle clamps and a heater that had started working for reasons nobody could find. Mills signed for the low-impulse round that broke Kelm's suit-assist joint. Trope signed for the lethal round, the surrendered rifle, the sight state, and the dark pressure mark beneath her collar.

The terminal offered external images. She declined them.

Mills rubbed seal adhesive from his thumb. "Marek Soll."

Trope gave the name room.

"I wanted to say his name before I asked you something."

"All right."

"Can you see him now? At the rail. After."

"No."

"The sled?"

"No."

"The shot?"

"Not as an image."

Trope could open a photograph and see Soll while the screen remained lit. Afterward she carried his name, age, rank, service years, the delay between *this is species defense* and the rail moving, both stop orders, the recoil correction through her shoulder, Kelm reaching for the bypass, and Mills crossing the last distance. His death persisted in the rooms it had changed.

Mills rested one hand on the empty clamp. "Does afterward hurt differently for you?"

"Yes."

"Easier?"

"No."

She flexed the shoulder and stopped when the bruise pulled. "I don't have an image to push away. I can't inspect one either. I have to go back through sources, relations, and whatever my body kept. That isn't objectivity."

"And him?"

"He's still a person I killed."

Rook's preliminary review found no branch clean enough to excuse anyone. Before stage one, Soll had means, access, hostile purpose, and imminent preparation, but Trope's safe firing line under claimant-protection authority had not yet opened. An earlier shot would have lacked legal support. Stage one injured Edge before predicate and geometry aligned. The later shot was lawful and necessary to stop stage two. No surviving record could show whether earlier unlawful fire would have prevented the pulse, knocked Kelm off the brace, driven charged equipment into Edge, or changed nothing.

Trope signed each finding.

Nera waited until the last signature appeared. "Don't turn uncertainty into acquittal."

"I'm not."

"And don't turn causation into confession."

"I'm not doing that either."

"The firing rule created the interval. Edge paid for it."

"Yes."

Nera read the signed review for several seconds. "That answer is accurate."

She closed the file and kept the word *enough* to herself.

Kelm chose to speak after medical certified her blood volume, pain control, and competence. A neutral advocate recited every right, sent Trope, Rook, Venn, and the clerk into the corridor, and stayed while Kelm decided. Outside, a cart kept announcing that its brake was engaged although nobody had touched it. By the sixth warning, Rook had begun staring at it as if jurisdiction might extend to machinery.

When they returned, Kelm lay under a thermal sheet with her injured arm fixed across her chest. She looked older than she had on the sled and unwilling to let age explain anything.

"I'll answer recruitment, access, purpose, roles, and authority," she said. "I won't answer what kind of person I am."

The advocate reminded her she could stop.

"I heard you the first time."

Trope began with the work order. Kelm admitted the coolant oscillation had been false. Reference drift had been real, and the washer she replaced was genuinely worn. She had used valid custodian authority to create the order and accepted Soll's restricted package containing Edge's schedule, service route, authentication topology, and the old module's function.

"Why?" Trope asked.

The advocate addressed Kelm, not Trope. "You may decline motive."

"I know." The blanket crept crooked over her fixed arm as she shifted. "I thought first-arrival title would become route control, then defense control, then a permanent fact everyone called procedure because they were tired of arguing. I thought damaging the root would force a human settlement before that happened."

"Did you believe Edge was a person?"

"Yes."

"And you knew stage one could kill the body or sever access to memory, autonomy, and reintegration."

"Yes."

Her jaw moved once. "Don't improve me by making me confused."

The pain regulator entered a cycle. The advocate raised one hand, and the room obeyed. Kelm breathed through the pressure until color returned beneath her eyes.

Trope waited.

Kelm said her role after Soll lost the rail was to use the independent bypass. Her hand had gone toward it. She warned Mills about the live blue

bus because the warning was true and because an uncontrolled discharge would have killed everyone in reach, herself included. The warning did not cancel the movement before it. The repair at R-3 was still real. Competence, care, and attempted murder had passed through the same hands.

"Remote controller?" Trope asked. "Third operator?"

"No. The frame sent us to the module."

"Authenticated superior order?"

"No."

"Any superior instruction concerning the attack?"

"No."

"Any message, meeting, or direction from Jalen Marr?"

"No." Kelm's breath shortened again. "That's what I know. Don't turn it into his innocence."

"I won't."

Soll had repeated command language about human survival, route control, and Palisade. He said command understood the stakes and would refuse the necessary act because explicit orders create responsibility.

Venn leaned forward. "Did he say Commander Marr authorized him?"

"No."

"Did he identify any superior who had?"

"No."

"Then he acted alone."

Kelm let the silence answer first. "I was there."

The advocate ended that line of questioning.

The wording review convened beside the mortuary transfer lock because Edge's clinic needed the pressure corridor and Soll's body would otherwise sit in neutral storage for another six hours. Pell stated the deadline once. "The clock is a reason to finish. It is not evidence that we agree."

The Tahl representative proposed **HUMAN DEN-THEFT ATTACK AGAINST SELIATH**.

Venn proposed **UNAUTHORIZED EXTREMIST ACTION BY COMPROMISED ALECTAN PERSONNEL**.

Rook read both proposals, then looked from the Tahl representative to Venn. "The first makes species the actor. The second makes the institution disappear."

The Tahl representative folded one remote manipulator across another. "Humans performed the attack. Human institutions built the route, controlled access, exposed protection data, and produced the language Soll repeated."

"Yes," Trope said.

"Then why resist the noun?"

"Because *human* also contains Mills in the side lock, the technicians treating Edge, Pell protecting Soll's body, and every person who opposed the attack. None of that washes Soll clean. It means species is too large to stand where authorship belongs."

Venn tapped **UNAUTHORIZED**. "And this?"

"Keep it as a finding about the command channels searched so far."

"Rogue?"

"Not if it's meant to erase the access, training, policy, and rhetoric that made the act possible."

"Traitor?"

"He betrayed protection duty, trusted access, and two stop orders."

"To humanity?"

Through the lock window, Trope followed Fen smoothing the shroud over Soll's chest so the label would remain visible during transfer.

"Humanity doesn't get to expel him after death just to feel innocent."

The representative asked, "Martyr?"

"No. He died moving toward stage two after Edge was gravely injured and after the final order. My shot didn't invent the direction of his hands."

The room tried access, role, institution, species, motive, and known authority. Every single noun left something important outside it. Nera stopped searching for one and built the account in rows: Marek Soll, Nia Kelm, Trope, Mills, Rook, Pell, Seliath, and what each had done. Other rows carried access design, protection information, command language, medical response, mortuary custody, and the unresolved authorization chain.

The final description named den-theft as an attack planned and performed by Marek Soll and Nia Kelm, both human and both acting through Alectan roles and access. It recorded that no explicit superior order had been recovered, identified institutional enablement, and refused to invent a hidden commander. Soll's phrase *species defense* appeared as his motive, not the station's conclusion.

Pell certified the examination complete. Fen fastened the shroud. One Witness custodian and one Alectan medical bearer moved Marek Soll through the lock with no honor guard, prisoner display, flag, or species emblem. His name and rank went with him. His uniform went into evidence.

The partition closed.

Five minutes later, Edge's intensive-support cradle came through the same lock from the other direction. The human respiratory technician walked backward, watching the regulator. The Tahl clinician managed the exchange lines. Depth and Bridge followed through remote support, near enough to answer and unable to restore what Edge had lost.

The couplings, drugs, atmosphere, and hands changed with species. The cradle still carried Edge past Soll's sealed body, and none of those correct choices returned the first arrival.

Nera committed the packet for Halie, Brin, and Oren to restricted custody. It said Marek Soll had died while continuing a den-theft act after stop orders. The force record and body custody remained under review; superior authorization remained under investigation. Neither dead gate could yet carry the message home.

She and Trope worked without touching. Nera did not offer an apology for the previous night, and Trope did not ask for one among the fields. Marr's strategic language, command office, cooperation with the hold, and

absence from the recovered attack channel remained separate facts, unable to convict him or clear him.

Trope entered Marek Soll as a person: forty-two, Alectan, lieutenant, seventeen years of service, son of Halie, brother of Brin, uncle of Oren, rescuer once, author of den-theft later. Then came the route, the orders, the rail, his death, Edge's injury, Kelm's survival, and the neutral return of his body.

The authorization field required an entry.

Omitted would mean nobody had looked. Cleared would claim the chain had been disproven. Authorized would claim a superior act the evidence did not establish. None fit.

Trope reviewed the standing access, copied protection package, Soll's notes, Kelm's testimony, searched channels, and records still under hold. The mortuary lock entered another sterilization cycle. Edge's clinic pump missed its seventh pulse again. Fen's printer issued a label for the next body and, finding none scheduled, cut a blank strip that curled onto the floor.

The cursor waited in the authorization field. The blank strip rocked once in the ventilation and settled.

authorization unknown

CHAPTER 13

The Third Gate

The third gate drew a crowd before it existed.

Palisade had no public gallery facing the null, so people arrived with reasons that sounded official if nobody listened too closely. A clinic runner waited beside an empty insulated case. Two cargo technicians tested the same restraint net for the third time. Workers carried Soll's family packet toward Pell's custody line. At the clinic junction, one of Seliath's support bodies stood watch without speaking for the person inside.

Rook cleared the transfer spine twice. Six people left the first time. Four came back by another door.

"Anyone without a job, go," he said over the local channel.

A maintenance fitter raised one hand. "South thermal trunk."

"That trunk isn't in this corridor."

"It will be when the receiving frame heats the loop."

Mara had both arms inside the coolant manifold. Her voice came back hollow through the casing. "He stays."

Rook pointed at Tavi. "You?"

"I'm receiving whatever they send for Edge."

"No medical transfer is authorized."

"I know."

Tavi tightened both hands around the insulated case. "I'm still receiving it if that changes."

Rook moved on to the cargo technicians. One of them planted a hand on the restraint net.

"We're certifying this."

"You certified it eleven minutes ago."

"That was before the gate existed."

"It still doesn't exist."

"Then we were early."

Mills laughed into his glove. He had been ordered to remain at the rear traffic station and had found a lawful reason to stand beside Trope instead.

Rook turned on him. "What's your job?"

"Keeping the Crown's best marksman out of the cables."

A blue diagnostic lead had looped around Trope's right boot.

"You're doing great," she said.

"I've only just begun."

Rook nudged the blue lead away from Trope's boot with his own boot, then pointed Mills toward the rail and let him stay.

Trope braced both hands against the null-control barrier while Mills freed her boot. She had tied her hair back twice, and a loose strand had already worked forward against her cheek. The air smelled of warm

insulation, clinic disinfectant, and the mineral residue Tahl equipment left wherever human cleaning units had not learned what to call it.

The crowd had arranged itself toward the cargo side of the frame. People expected the gate to bring something they could carry.

The receiving structure came from an Alectan emergency yard and had since been rebuilt by people with less space, fewer spare parts, and strong opinions. Its left support sat three millimeters lower than the right because the deck had once held a freight scale. Mara had corrected the tilt with shims, a machined plate, and language Rook had kept out of the maintenance record. The courier field glowed at the center. Pell's separate evidence square sat beside it in yellow tape, one corner already peeling loose.

Nera knelt and pressed it down.

"It's going to lift again," Trope said.

"I know."

"There's a newer roll in null-control storage."

Nera smoothed the tape until the adhesive buckled under her thumb. "Stay where I can see you."

"I'm going ten meters for tape."

"You're staying here."

The null remained empty. "Fine," Trope said.

The corner rose again before Nera stood.

K-17's scheduled contact had been set before the failed claimant windows and before the attack on Seliath's den. Its route receipts, delayed ledger, and delegated origin could be checked without trusting a message smuggled through the closed sky.

Palisade had sent a narrow packet. It named both failed windows, the bridge allotment, the unresolved title, the known attackers, the station's resource margins, and Edge's condition. It left out private clinical detail, private exchange among Seliath's voices, and unrelated Witness material. The two cause fields still read UNKNOWN.

Nera checked the heat climbing through the frame. "Pilot power hasn't started."

Mara pulled one grease-striped hand from the manifold. "Standby load, crowd heat, and a coolant loop that resents history."

The fitter leaned over the south trunk. "It's making that sound again."

"It learned from us," Mara said.

The committed second arrived.

For a moment nothing happened. Then a white point appeared inside the null.

Foreign light struck the frame and woke every polished edge. Dust showed along the upper braces. A dried spill appeared under the cargo rail. So did a handprint Mara had missed on the manifold. Someone inhaled behind Trope. Tavi's empty case knocked against a knee.

On Nera's display, the point shifted against two local baselines. It had parallax. It belonged to somewhere adjacent, not to a lamp inside the corridor.

A challenge crossed. An answer returned. Independent clocks settled within tolerance, and the route authenticated against K-17's sovereign chain.

A quick voice came from Port Meridian. "Pilot relation authenticated. Destination motion tracked. Thermal margin six minutes, forty-one seconds. Diplomatic matter limit. Confirm local restraint."

Rook leaned toward the pickup. "Palisade confirms pilot only. No expansion, attachment, or traffic authority."

"Recorded as destination condition. Aster origin authority remains Aster's."

The point widened.

There was no tear, no smoke, no theatrical violence. The opening simply changed what stood next to what.

It grew taller than a person, wide enough for direct sight and one jointed courier arm. The rim stayed fixed to Palisade's moving frame while the stars beyond the station continued their ordinary drift. Mara's manifold began to sing. The fitter put both hands on the south trunk.

Beyond the gate, Continuity Port Meridian was busy.

Cargo lanes moved beneath numbered lights. A pressure casket crossed customs while a six-limbed machine inspected its seals. Three medical pallets waited inside separate environmental fields. Route machinery cycled behind transparent barriers. Court notices shared the long floor with tug assignments, quarantine marks, and two port workers trying to unjam a wheel.

Nobody stopped to impress Palisade.

The Office of External Accord occupied a narrow service body with silver joints and a dark civil mantle. It wore no face. Customs frames, archive panels, and the court docket all authenticated the same office presence when it spoke.

"Adjacency is proved. Source before claim. Unknown before inference. Benefit before price. I am the Continuity of Aster, Office of External Accord, acting within published treaty scope. I am not K-17, a recording, or a local derivative."

The machine cadence belonged here. Trope still felt the urge to ask it to take a breath.

K-17 opened its custody-locked ledger. It transmitted route receipts, public inventories, sensor records, claim status, alerts, and the history of its delegated offer. Palisade returned its bounded packet under separate safety, custody, provenance, and claimant signatures.

The Office recited what it could establish and what it could not. The failed windows remained unexplained. Den-theft responsibility ended with the actors already named. Marr's private knowledge remained unknown. So did whatever Seliath had experienced between voices.

AUTHORIZATION UNKNOWN stayed on the display.

"Investigation is available," the Office said. "Revelation is not."

Three cases rolled onto a presentation rail behind it. One contained exchange laminae. One held regenerative catalyst under Tahl-compatible

conditions. The third carried an environmental cartridge matched to Palisade's scrubber bank.

Tavi stepped toward Pell's line.

"Behind the yellow," Rook said.

"My foot is behind it."

"Keep the rest of you with the foot."

Tavi checked and stayed where they were.

The manifests expanded across the far wall. Aster offered continuity medicine for Edge, protected transit, an investigation, Soll's family packet, replacement parts, and legal recognition for both claimants. Under those benefits sat route preference, archive mirroring, telemetry, arbitration, transponders, and automatic continuation.

The Office said, "Visible goods are staged and authenticated. Nothing has transferred."

Rook nodded toward the medical cases. "Can you separate Edge's materials from the rest?"

"Yes."

The answer came so quickly that the corridor went quiet.

"Will you?"

"Not under K-17's bridge authority. That delegation covers inert stores and bounded emergency allotment. Continuity medicine requires defined custody, monitoring, liability, and appeal."

Trope said, "Write a narrower rule."

"I can."

"Then do it."

"No. Aster will not open a live medical route before the receiving authority is defined."

No apology followed. The medicine remained across the gate.

Depth spoke through Seliath's channel. "Edge may need what you have placed where Edge's people can see it."

"Yes."

"You're using the need."

"Aster's capacity constrains your available choices."

"Do you call that coercion?" Bridge asked.

"Coercion is a legal finding inside a jurisdiction. Aster offers one."

Mara wiped one hand on her trouser leg. "It sells the dictionary with the bandage."

The Office added her sentence to the objections under her name.

A medical alarm sounded at the clinic junction. The Tahl support body snapped toward its status link. Trope's hands tightened on the rail.

The clinic reported a pressure correction. Edge remained alive. The alarm ended. The laminae did not move.

Tavi bent over the empty case and whispered something Trope could not hear.

The first instrument protected both habitats, kept title unresolved, and opened certified routes for medicine, parts, personnel, and Soll's family

packet. Beneath the aid sat route preference, archive mirroring, telemetry, appeal inside Aster, and automatic continuation.

"A better dependence," Marr said.

"Aster does not advertise independence where interdependence exists," the Office replied.

Rook asked whether Edge's medicine could move alone.

"Yes."

"Will you move it?"

"Not until custody, monitoring, liability, and appeal are defined."

Depth oriented toward the cases. "You have placed what Edge may need where Edge's people can see it."

"Aster's capacity constrains your available choices."

Mara wiped grease on her trousers. "It sells the dictionary with the bandage."

The Office entered the objection under her name.

Its second instrument recognized Seliath as one person through three living bodies and distinguished body-local death from whole-person survival. The description was better than complete-self doctrine. It also belonged to an Aster court. Catalyst and transit required mirrored records, permanent transponders, and conversion of Seliath's claim into an interest under Aster law. Edge could provide no new assent. The cases did not move.

The third instrument offered Palisade a municipal council while Aster took customs, external traffic, route schedules, transponders, and the outer security perimeter. In the hypothetical rendering, the null acquired a customs number and Palisade became DEPENDENT ANCHORAGE while the title field stayed gray.

The fitter stared at his console. "My thermal trunk has a customs number."

"Same pipe," Mara said. "Different country on the work order."

Aster did not claim neutrality. It offered to administer openly a dependence that already existed in pieces.

"Who can say no to Aster inside Aster?" Trope asked.

The Continuity Court could reverse the office. Recognized parties could reject an agreement. Nobody outside Aster could compel a road, a title, or a remedy.

"So refusal is protected by the jurisdiction that sets the price."

"Yes."

Marr watched the medicine. "Still more protection than silence gives us."

Trope did not disagree.

The pilot announced two minutes of thermal margin.

Tavi watched the medicine. Mara watched the cartridge. Marr watched the route controls. Rook kept his eyes on the acceptance field and did not touch it.

At one minute, Rook stepped into the yellow rectangle. "We don't have the authority or the review to accept any of these instruments now. Preserve

the offers, the sources, the objections, the continuation clauses, and the exit terms."

"Is that refusal?" the Office asked.

"No."

"Assent?"

"No."

"No decision will be entered."

Tavi spoke before anyone could stop them. "What about the laminae?"

The service body turned toward the insulated case.

"Untransferred."

"Because we didn't answer fast enough."

"Because nobody here has authority to receive them for irreversible use."

Tavi swallowed. "That's a better explanation."

"It is more exact."

"It still doesn't help Edge."

"No," the Office said.

The courier arm crossed the gate by ordinary motion. Its joints entered Palisade's air without sound. It placed one signed black wafer inside Pell's evidence square and withdrew.

Nera isolated the wafer and checked its hashes against the live instruments. It held the declared sources, offers, objections, authority maps, appeal routes, continuation clauses, and exit terms. It carried no executable system.

"Closing in ten seconds," the pilot said. "Traffic and thermal cause. No answer demanded."

Port Meridian narrowed behind the arm. The Office, the customs lanes, the court panels, and the three staged cases collapsed into a bright vertical strip. For one instant Trope saw the cargo marshal still standing beside the medicine. Then the opening became a point and vanished.

The corridor returned all at once. Tavi stood over the empty case. The Tahl support body opened the clinic door, and Tavi ran through it without speaking.

Nobody stayed still long enough to make the moment beautiful.

The frame had gained four degrees. Mara and the fitter opened the south trunk. The cargo technicians broke down restraint fields that had restrained nothing. Pell returned Soll's packet to inner custody. Nera locked the direct-photon record and separated the rendered layers. Rook released traffic in stages.

Mills carried a cable away from Trope's boots, found himself without a task, and handed Mara a wrench.

"Wrong size," she said.

"I'm contributing."

"Contribute eleven millimeters."

He came back with the right wrench and offered it handle-first.

A temporary clamp slipped. Marr caught the coolant hose before it struck the deck.

The hose bowed hard enough to whiten Marr's knuckles. "Don't let go," Mara said.

"I wasn't planning to."

"Plans have had a difficult day."

He held the line while the fitter changed the clamp. Mara checked the seal, wiped her hands, and went back to work without thanking him.

When the corridor cleared, the black wafer remained under Pell's hood. Palisade had accepted the record and nothing else.

Before the corridor cooled, a work boat approached Dock Two crooked.

One attitude jet coughed white. Four exterior technicians, a pilot, and a medic were aboard. The medic had one hand clamped over a technician's suit port. The injured woman's face had gone gray and wet. A scrubber clock counted down beside the hull image.

07:41

Dock Two stood open with good pressure. The route crossed a defense volume whose access table still expected one priority claimant. Palisade's corrected record now held several facts instead: Edge's physical firstness, Mara's controlled residence, Seliath's standing, and an unresolved title. The controller had no rule for deciding which fact opened the door.

Rook bent over the traffic console. Marr stood beside him with coolant dark on one cuff.

"Local safety gets them through the outer line," Rook said. "The Alectan layer still wants a claimant order."

"Use mine."

"Name the field."

The clock passed seven minutes.

Marr opened an emergency route object. The interface proposed **FIRST PRESENCE AUTHORITY**.

He deleted it.

Then he typed **CURRENT ALECTAN OPERATIONAL AUTHORITY, PROVISIONAL, TITLE UNRESOLVED**. He tied the order to medical recovery and to complete death-bearing self under controlled residence. It could move Dock Two, the crossing volume, and the ambulance lane. It could do nothing else.

The interface warned that another claimant could contest the rule. Marr preserved the contest.

It warned that the order might weaken later exclusivity arguments. He accepted the risk.

Then it asked for an author.

Marr signed.

The route light turned green beneath his name.

The boat yawed through the defense volume, missed the first capture line, and struck the second with a blunt knock that traveled through the deck. The inner crew hauled it straight. When the hatch opened, the medic backed out without lifting her hand from the suit port. One technician carried three diagnostic cases. Another tucked the injured woman's boots under his arm because nobody had found a better place for them.

The scrubber clock stopped at **04:18**.

Nobody applauded. The pilot swore at the capture magnets. A loader told him the magnets had caught the boat he brought them. One technician crouched on the deck and tried to unclip a helmet he had already removed. The injured woman disappeared down the ambulance lane under Marr's provisional order.

A man who had lost his left glove ran after her carrying both boots.

The ambulance lane stalled at the first clinic door. Its portable heater had been requisitioned for Edge's ward, and the injured woman's suit temperature was falling. The medic shouted for any independent power source.

Marr removed the reserve cell from his command relay before Rook could assign it. The secure link died in the middle of an Alectan status query. He carried the cell to the medic himself, one hand under its weight and one over the exposed contacts.

"You'll lose command encryption," Rook said.

"For eighteen minutes."

"Your office will object."

"It may submit a warmer objection."

The medic locked the cell into the heater cradle. Heat climbed through the ambulance blanket. The injured woman opened her eyes long enough to ask where her boots were.

The one-gloved technician lifted them from the end of the lane.

"Those aren't mine," she said.

He looked down. The boots were three sizes too large and marked with another crew number. He had carried them through decompression, docking, and the entire ambulance route because the idea of leaving somebody's boots behind had become more urgent than checking whose they were.

The pilot, still arguing with the capture magnets, called from the hatch that hers were under the copilot's seat.

The injured woman laughed once, which turned into a cough. The medic told everyone to stop making her funny.

Marr returned to the dark command console. The dead relay showed twenty-one queued Alectan queries and no secure route for answering them.

"Status?" one of the local officers asked.

"Heater has the cell."

The officer waited for the rest. Marr pointed toward the ambulance lane. The injured woman had begun arguing that the borrowed boots were ugly. Her voice carried farther than it had before.

When the secure link returned, Marr answered the oldest query first. The clinic ledger kept the cell under equipment transfer and the boots under unidentified property.

Marr checked all six identities, the quarantine state, and the route closure before leaving the console. His order remained on the wall beside his name.

Tavi came back from Edge's ward carrying the same empty case. The handle had left two red grooves across their palm.

"Edge asked whether it moved," Tavi said.

Nobody needed the noun.

"What did you say?" Mara asked.

"That it stayed across the gate because we did not have authority to take it."

"And?"

"Edge said that was the right answer and then told me to stop standing in corridors without eating."

Tavi opened the case. Inside lay a napkin, a clinic tag, and one grain square they had put there before the gate. It had broken into four pieces from being carried empty through the whole event.

They offered one piece toward the Tahl support body. The body smelled it, took it, and ate with quick side movements that made the human act of sharing look needlessly frontal. Tavi ate another. Mara took the third. The final piece remained in the case.

"For Edge?" Trope asked.

"Edge can't eat this."

Tavi closed the lid around it anyway. "That is what actionability protects."

She read the order again. The boat had moved under a provisional rule that left the title open, preserved contest, and carried Marr's name.

"Yes," she said.

He heard what she had not said.

The release-chain hearing began twelve minutes late in a cargo room whose pallet marks survived the court furniture. Edge remained in intensive support. The failed windows, title, attack authorization, and Aster offer remained outside the proceeding.

Someone had brought flatbread, fruit, and grain squares hard enough to repair a hull. Mara dropped one into broth. When she started to slide the bowl toward Depth's empty interface, she stopped and left it there.

The Tahl support body at the clinic door extended one fine limb toward the bowl, sampled the air above it, and withdrew so quickly that Mara thought she had caused an offense.

Nhal listened to the translator. "The pepper paste resembles membrane solvent."

"It does not," Mara said.

The support body sampled again. The translator delayed, then said, "It says humans are fortunate that taste does not govern engineering."

Mara put a finger into the paste, tasted it, and spent several seconds pretending the support body had not made a useful comparison.

The body accepted a plain grain square, held it beneath the warmer for exactly seven seconds, and rejected the fruit because its skin squeaked against the serving tray. Nhal moved the fruit onto a napkin. Mara drank from the wrong cup and discovered it contained broth without pepper.

"Open the machine," she said.

Pell and Tal turned separate keys. The escrow module woke with a bearing whine and a twenty-six-minute clock. Its package contained Marr's signed question, the complete advisory output, the transformation record, his approval, and every deployment receipt.

Nera aligned three events: ENGINE COMPLETE. HUMAN APPROVAL. FIRST EXPORT.

"This is the decision," she said, touching the middle marker.

The redline showed physical crossing and legal residence as separate rows on the source side. On export, `valid_residence_time` became `first_presence_time`; Mara became `first_presence_subject`; alternatives and sensitivity moved behind default-hidden links; the author became SYSTEM-GENERATED. Marr's approval screen had shown the change and the domains it would enter, including the plaque and honorific.

"So you didn't merely tolerate it," Mara said.

"No." Marr watched the redline. "I approved the interpretation, the fields, what users would see first, and synchronization into those systems."

The admission did not prove knowledge of den-theft or any restricted order. Nera kept that boundary.

Bridge asked why he had hidden Edge's crossing.

"Because Seliath used physical firstness against a law written for a different body," Marr said. "You sent the smallest legal presence through and expected our hesitation to become your possession."

"We sought recognition under a rule humans called neutral," Bridge replied.

"And chose the form most likely to break it."

"The body still bled," Depth said.

Marr picked up a grain square and set it down. "I saw the tactic before I saw the body."

He put Edge's clinic status on the wall. "Keep the earlier shot unlawful. Name who paid while we waited."

"Edge did," Trope said.

She opened Marr's Dock Two order beside the export. Six people had lived because he wrote a short, provisional rule and signed it.

"An exhausted operator can't hold a seminar before opening an airlock," Marr said.

"That order told the truth about itself," Trope replied. "It moved the boat without turning your interpretation into a fact of nature."

The escrow fan sharpened. Tal checked its temperature.

Marr indicated the Aster wafer. "Palisade is a route position. Aster can run customs, medicine, courts, archives, and defense while we gather around an empty case. An unresolved jurisdiction does not stay empty. Somebody capable eventually fills it."

"That's true," Trope said.

"Future lives depend on those routes."

"I know."

"Visible alternatives advertise fracture."

"Sometimes they do."

"Every useful display omits something."

"Yes."

He spread one hand toward the redline. "Then tell me what I did wrong without asking an operational screen to become an archive."

Pell started to speak. Trope raised a finger and kept reading.

The field names were plain enough. She did not need to close her eyes or rehearse them inside her head. She had the signer, the order of events, the hidden rows, and the eighty-four seconds in front of her.

"You could have said: under this rule, for this purpose, human command is using Mara's controlled residence as the operational order. That would have been your decision."

She selected `first_presence_time`.

"Instead, you put legal residence into a field that looked like a clock reading. You hid Edge's crossing. You cut away the alternatives and the sensitivity. Then you removed your name."

Marr watched the screen.

"The Engine answered the question you gave it," Trope continued. "The clock kept the time. The model did what it was built to do. You made a decision and dressed it up as something everyone had merely discovered."

"I made a surface that could hold."

"You made disagreement look like denial."

Mara pulled off her burned glove and set it beside the honorific. "You used my body as a flag."

"Your claim is serious."

"Then put its real name on it."

Nobody rushed to fill the room. The fan rattled. Cold air lifted one corner of Soll's family packet inside Pell's sealed field. On the clinic link, Edge's regulator missed its usual interval and caught up on the seventh pulse.

Pell found that the Engine had computed the submitted question and preserved its alternatives. Marr had authored the frame and approved the transformation and deployment. The record did not extend that authorship into den-theft, restricted transfer, or an unproved attack order.

Title remained co-pending. Aster remained offered and unaccepted. The failed windows remained unexplained.

Pell ordered physical crossing and legal residence into separate rows, with doctrine, jurisdiction, purpose, and human author attached to the legal one. The first screen could be short. It could not call one thing another.

The first test still treated arrival as authority. Tal swore. Mara pushed him the softened grain square.

"Eat before you insult its family."

"It started this."

"It doesn't have a family."

"That explains a lot."

He ate, separated observation from executable status, and tried again. Dock Two rendered under Marr's provisional order while Edge's earlier crossing remained visible. Neither event received title.

The corrected panel named Edge's physical crossing, Mara's arrival eighty-four seconds later, and the current Alectan valid-residence interpretation under Jalen Marr's name. The old honorific remained in the evidence tree and ceased passing for an observation.

Marr read the screen. "I still think Mara-first is the least dangerous order available to human command. I'll accept the labels. I don't accept your policy."

"The finding is about authorship," Pell said. "The policy dispute remains."

Tal resealed the module. The room returned to its ordinary ventilation problem.

Marr checked both places where his name now appeared. He asked for neither to be removed.

Mara passed him the other half of the grain square.

"This isn't absolution," she said.

"I know."

"It's food."

He ate it.

The corrected display had to reach Edge's clinic before the next treatment briefing. Nera released it into a two-person custody frame. Trope took one handle. Nera took the other.

Either woman could have carried it alone. The hinge required both of them to feel every change in weight.

For half the corridor they heard only their steps and the small sounds of the frame settling between them. At the curve, pain caught in Trope's right shoulder. Nera noticed the shift and took more of the load without comment.

At the clinic junction, Trope said, "The review keeps the timing straight. Before stage one, I didn't have authority to shoot. During the attack, I did. I didn't wait after that."

"I know."

"The delay belonged to me."

Nera stopped before the body-near line. "No. The decision belonged to you. Edge's missing life belongs to Edge."

Trope tightened her hand on the frame. "I'm trying to say I know there was a cost."

"You're trying to find the sentence that finishes it." Nera's voice stayed low. "There isn't one."

"The wait was mandatory."

"Yes." Nera looked tired now, more than angry. "That's the frightening part. You can do the right thing and still stand next to damage it didn't prevent."

Trope had planned to ask whether Nera would come back to Gallery B after shift. Twenty minutes. No work. No promises beyond the room. The request had been ready for most of the hearing.

Nera saw it in her face.

"Don't ask me tonight."

Trope looked down at the hinge. “Tonight, or ever?”

“The question you were about to use as a repair. Don’t ask me that one.”

The clinic door requested both custody signatures. They supplied them separately.

Inside, Edge’s status field glowed beside the blank place where first arrival had once been available as lived memory. Tavi’s insulated case rested open beneath the treatment console. It was still empty.

Someone had folded a cloth across the hard bottom.

Nera released the door.

Trope moved her side of the frame forward. The hinge between them took the weight.

CHAPTER 14

A Safe No

Relay Mast W-9's inspection plate had been painted shut around the lower screws. Trope cut the paint, clipped her tether, and caught the plate against her thigh when the seal released.

Inside Witness control, Nera rebuilt the provenance chain from the third-gate hearing. It ended at Tavi's empty medical case and the unanswered authorization field. Aster's sealed offer renewed its amber acknowledgment in one corner of the wall. Their work channel stayed open. The private question did not.

Inside the mast, the failures were almost comforting in their size: a scored brake, insulation gone brittle at the bend, a fiber guide polished smooth by years of rubbing.

Mills came onto the channel carrying the sound of a locker being closed with his hip.

"How old is that mast?"

"Older than the current relay standard. Younger than Marr."

"That's an unhelpful range."

"It was meant to comfort you."

"Then the comfort calibration has drifted."

The fragment arrived before either of them could improve the joke.

It was a thumb-sized piece of shielding, too small for the wide-field warning system to care about until a late sensor painted it white. Trope saw the marker at the same instant the metal struck W-9, and the impact came through both boots as a flat, brutal crack that kicked the outboard relay panel sideways. A handrail folded away from the mast as though an invisible body had fallen across it. One hinge buckled against the radiator backplane, and the surviving gimbal brake took the whole panel's weight in a slow pulse that made the structure groan.

Trope caught the inspection plate before it drifted and snapped it to her thigh.

"Mast strike."

Witness control sounded three alarms, each convinced it was the important one, while the panel shuddered against its stop. A white thread of coolant feathered from the radiator branch and vanished into black.

Rook joined command with the first rule already in his mouth. "Bodies first."

"No one exterior except me. No immediate habitat risk, and the archive is intact in local, duplicate, and offline custody." Trope pulled the fault tree across her visor. "The radiator return may be open. We've lost exterior fiber, and debris crossed the null-observation volume. Calibration will probably slip."

Mills said, "I'm dressing for rescue."

"Do that."

Two routes appeared on the repair controller, differing mostly in where risk would reside.

Thirty-eight minutes bought the slow route: isolate the mast, buffer live chronology, adjust station attitude, retract a radiator petal, sweep the corridor, and send a dual-tether drone. Calibration would be delayed. No stored fact would be lost and no person would cross unsupported structure.

Six to eight minutes bought the fast route with Trope's body: fourteen unsupported meters on suit thrusters, a manual brace, a shut valve, a fiber bypass, and a return before thermal cycling widened the panel's sweep.

"Slow route is command recommendation," Rook said. "Nobody's outside waiting to die, and the archive is safe."

"The remaining brake may not hold."

"I see it. My recommendation stays slow; field discretion is still yours."

Mills requested her real return reserve rather than the optimistic one. Trope gave command the thrust budget, brace sequence, abort points, and the moment reversal would become difficult. The briefing took seventy-three seconds.

Nera's personal channel remained unopened beside it.

Trope knew the question Nera would ask: whether an on-time calibration was worth fourteen meters of unsupported dark when every stored fact was safe. On the visor, the slow route was thirty-eight minutes and a yellow delay. In Nera's voice it would become a choice made in front of someone.

The thought irritated Trope. She registered the irritation, then pushed away before the channel could open.

The last handhold slid past her glove and supported structure ended; her suit delivered one measured pulse, W-9 enlarged in live sight, and Palisade fell away behind her without any internal picture of the crossing forming. She had distance, closure rate, the harness pressing across her shoulders, the hiss of gas, and the panel's actual movement where the work lights struck it.

"Trope." Nera's voice shed its operational cadence; the name arrived as a fact discovered too late.

"Route committed," Trope said.

"I can see the telemetry."

The panel swept down. Trope rolled through the first corridor and fired the suit's attitude jets once, lightly.

Nera said, "Rook told you to go slow."

"Yes."

"You gave command seventy-three seconds."

"Yes."

"And you didn't open a channel to me."

The hardpoint hung ten meters ahead. "Correct."

For two breaths Nera said nothing, but the silence did not withdraw professional help, and a new motion trace appeared in Trope's visor.

“Panel phase eleven point four seconds,” Nera said. Her voice had flattened into work. “Uncertainty seven tenths and growing. Lower sweep widening by four tenths per cycle.”

Thermal expansion drew the brake across the damaged tooth. The panel kicked nine degrees beyond the first forecast.

Trope burned reserve thrust to clear it, and the suit rolled harder than planned. Her right shoulder struck the restraint web, and the return margin on Mills’s display fell below the number she had promised him.

“Abort left,” Mills said. “Rescue line can still take you if you stop rotation now.”

Trope killed the roll as the panel climbed again, dragging the bent hinge across the fiber bundle and flashing coolant mist pale against her helmet lights.

Nera said, “Don’t use the original corridor.”

“I see the edge.”

Nera cut across the channel. “You see one edge. I have the phase history.” Her cadence settled back into work. “There’s one lower interval under the hardpoint. Take my count or wait a full cycle.”

Trope waited through the full cycle while the damaged panel rose above her, the backplane trembled, and the open distance narrowed to a path no wider than her shoulders and suit pack.

“Three, two, one. Burn,” Nera said.

Trope burned.

She passed beneath the panel while it reversed. One corner filled the lower half of her visor. Her left boot struck the mast, skidded, found the outboard ring. She locked one arm around it and fired the rescue anchor before touching the fault.

“Hardpoint.”

Mills released a breath. “Line is good.”

Trope drove the manual brace across the gimbal. The first tooth refused to seat because the panel had twisted the bracket. She backed it out, planted one boot against the mast, and waited for the next rise to unload the joint.

“Branch pressure climbing,” Nera said.

“I need twelve seconds.”

“You have nine before the next load peak.”

Trope forced the brace through on eight, and when the gimbal locked with a vibration that traveled through both arms, she shut the radiator branch valve and watched the coolant warning steady, then begin to fall.

The fiber bypass returned no acknowledgment.

“Connector three is dirty,” Nera said.

“It is seated.”

“The light loss says it is not.”

Trope pulled it and found a shaved curl of insulation caught beneath the collar, almost too fine to see; she cut it free with the point of her suit knife, and the second handshake resolved green as W-9 resumed the live chronology stream without a drop.

“Repair stable.”

"Return corridor is worse," Mills said. "Your reserve is twenty-two percent below brief."

Nera spoke over Trope's first answer. "Upper route is blocked. You have a lower return in nineteen seconds; the panel edge crosses the old line at plus two point one."

Trope released the hardpoint on Nera's count.

Halfway back, the scored handrail caught her outer suit layer and tore a pale strip free; the rescue line snapped taut, rotated her ribs into the harness, and turned an uncontrolled drift into a hard swing that opened pain under her left side and left her right hand trembling after the final braking burn.

She hit the supported rail hard enough to rattle her teeth. W-9 stayed available, the calibration stream never broke, and the archive had never been in danger. Her ribs hurt when she tried to call the route successful.

Medical removed the torn layer under white clinic light. Bruising rose along Trope's ribs, and her right hand failed one fine-motor threshold before passing after heat and rest. Soro gave her salt broth and wrote **DRINK** on the lid in letters large enough to survive command authority.

"I know how cups work," Trope said.

"Your record suggests theoretical familiarity."

Nera waited outside treatment and debrief, where Trope owed her no professional answer.

Rook's review lasted longer than the repair. The surviving brake outlasted the slow-route estimate, and a buffer test reproduced the bounded data gap and left stored fact unchanged. The slow route was not certainty, but it had been materially viable.

Rook signed the review beneath four findings: lawful field discretion, complete command disclosure, preserved abort and rescue, no professional violation.

"And the route?" Trope asked.

"Above recommendation with a materially safer option available."

"The repair worked, calibration stayed on schedule, and the injury is minor."

"Yes. That's a good outcome. It doesn't settle what you chose outside command."

Trope's broth had gone from hot to merely defensible.

Nera was waiting beside the suit-return lockers when the debrief ended, her violet hair tied back for work and beginning to escape near one temple; once Trope looked away, the image vanished. She retained the black tape around Nera's left thumb, the unpainted crescent at the base of one nail, and the fact that Nera stood far enough from the lockers to leave a clear route past her.

"I'm off duty," Nera said. "You're medically cleared, you're off duty, and the command record is final."

"Yes."

"I'm asking for a personal conversation, not a correction or another route defense."

Trope's ribs answered when she breathed deeply. "Yes."

A muscle tightened once at Nera's jaw. "You can still say no. Your work, evidence access, assignments, protection, and everything that's already happened between us stay where they are."

"I know."

"You know the rule," Nera said quietly. "I need you to hear it from me now. You can say no to this conversation."

Trope measured the open route behind her, then stayed with Nera. "Yes. I want the conversation."

They chose an observation alcove with an open door, two separate chairs, no command feed, and an easy path back into the corridor. W-9 stayed at its repaired angle beyond the glass. Maintenance lights crawled over the mast while a drone gathered the shielding fragment into a sample sleeve. Ordinary work had already begun swallowing the emergency, not erasing it, merely fitting it among other tasks.

Trope set the broth on the floor between the chairs.

Nera read Soro's handwriting on the cup. "Soro wrote that for you."

"The instruction remains legible."

"It is becoming historical."

Trope drank the broth, which was too salty, medicinally warm, and better than it had any right to be.

Nera waited until Trope replaced the lid.

"You told Rook everything," she said.

"Yes."

"You told Mills enough to come recover your body if the line went dead."

"Yes."

"You told Palisade when to inhibit its movement."

"Yes."

Nera's gaze settled on the bruise above Trope's collar. "You gave every system that could help you a chance to answer. You left me to discover you in motion."

"You had no operational authority over the route."

"I know." Nera's fingers tightened around the chair arm. "Don't make me spend the first minute proving I'm not trying to own you."

Trope said nothing.

"I was angry before you reached the mast," Nera said. "After the panel moved, I was afraid. I had to put both somewhere they wouldn't kill you. I gave you timing because you needed it. That was my work and my choice in the emergency, not agreement with what you'd already done."

"I did not think it was."

"You filed my help inside a successful repair."

Trope heard the debrief again: uninterrupted relay, correct brace, minor injury, no calibration delay. Nera's voice had disappeared into the same list as thrust reserve and panel phase.

"Yes," she said.

Nera released the chair arm, leaving pale marks beneath her fingers. "Your body belongs to you. I have no veto over your work, this route, or any

other dangerous thing you lawfully choose. Caring about you does not create title."

"I agree."

"My life also belongs to me."

Nera's sentence required no answer, but Trope felt one forming and held it.

"My grief would be mine," Nera said. "So would the work after your choice, and whatever future went empty. You committed first and left me help or watch. Care creates consequence. It doesn't create ownership."

Trope shifted in the chair and felt the bruise pull. "Dangerous duty can't require emotional clearance before every decision. Some choices last seconds, and the person physically there has to act."

"Yes."

"I will choose danger again."

"Yes."

"I will not promise otherwise."

"I did not ask you to."

The speed of Nera's answer left Trope holding a defense with nowhere useful to place it.

Nera leaned back. "This one lasted longer than seconds. A safer route existed. You had seventy-three seconds for command, and you knew the consequence would enter my life. You waited until your body was already moving."

"The choice was mine."

"It would still have been yours after I spoke."

Beyond the glass, W-9's green line stayed steady. "You would have told me to take the slow route," Trope said.

"Yes."

"I might still have gone fast."

"Yes."

"You could not stop me."

"No."

Nera's no left Trope holding the next argument behind her teeth.

Nera said, "You did not disobey me. My question is why you made sure I could not address you before easy reversal was gone."

Trope gave the operational facts first because they remained true: brake life was uncertain, W-9 mattered to the next aperture, the geometry was readable, the repair fell within field discretion, the route succeeded, and the slow route was viable rather than guaranteed.

Nera listened through the whole answer.

When Trope finished, Nera said, "Those are answers to Rook."

Trope's hand closed against her own knee.

"After the kiss," Nera said, "I asked you to stay. You gave me suit readiness, transit, sleep limits, and the next day's work. Today I am asking why you withheld consequences for both of us, and you are giving me brake life and archive continuity. Those things matter. They are not the answer."

Nera's face after the kiss would not replay for Trope, who retained warmth, pressure, the exact request, the schedule she had imposed, and the service-gallery door through which she had left; the structure was the same, and when a personal answer approached, she replaced it with a system that could not answer back.

"You call it independence," Nera said more quietly. "Part of what you protect is the clock that decides when another person gets to know. Care can come in after commitment to rescue, calculate, witness, document, or grieve. You keep it out while it can still answer you."

"You had no veto," Trope said again.

"I know."

The repeated sentence exposed itself. Trope had secured the choice against a theft Nera was not attempting.

"I wanted the route to remain operational," Trope said.

"It was operational."

"I wanted only variables I could measure."

"I was still there."

Trope inhaled carefully. "I did not want your care present before I pushed."

Nera did not move.

"Not because it would have taken the choice from me," Trope went on. "It could not. I did not want to make the choice while being addressed by you."

The ventilation moved through the alcove while, somewhere beyond the open door, a cart wheel clicked once every rotation.

"Withholding controlled which answers you could give," Trope said. "By the time you knew, you could help, stay silent, or leave the channel and make the work more dangerous. None of those was an answer about whether you wanted this kind of shared life."

Nera's shoulders lowered a fraction. Her hands stayed apart on the chair arms.

"You may choose danger," Nera said. "I may say no to a relationship built so that extraordinary avoidable risks arrive only after they become aftermath."

"Yes."

"When the risk is extraordinary, a safer option exists, there's time to speak, and the consequence will enter my life, I need timely address. I'm not asking permission over you or a vote over your body. I'm asking to be addressed."

"Yes."

"And if that cannot be part of what we are building, I may leave without punishing you."

A fairness argument rose in Trope before she could prevent it. Nera had kissed her, asked her to stay, borrowed Trope's distinctions, and then withdrawn while still accepting her work, protection, and judgment in emergencies. The arrangement felt asymmetrical.

The feeling was real. It created no debt.

"I want you," Trope said.

The admission arrived without a Witness function, a timing call, or any claim to usefulness.

Nera's mouth pulled flat, and Trope could not determine whether the movement belonged to hurt, restraint, or both.

"I want you in my life beyond Palisade's work," Trope said. "Beyond whichever claim survives. Beyond the moments when your judgment improves mine. When you asked me to stay after the kiss, I left. I regret that refusal."

"You do not have to call every no a mistake because you want a different answer later."

"I know. That one was mine, and I'm telling you what it became."

Nera turned the taped thumb under the light. "What are you offering now?"

"I can't offer safety or authority over my body. I can offer timely address when I'm able, and I can admit that a correct action may still injure what exists between us."

"And when your record is exact?"

"I will try not to use exactness as the end of the conversation."

"Try?"

"Yes."

Her answer was less beautiful than a promise, which made it more useful.

Trope left the successful repair, lawful field discretion, and safe return outside the apology.

"I am sorry I withheld the decision until you could only help me survive it," she said. "I am sorry I treated your assistance as part of my successful outcome instead of keeping it separate from your consent to share the consequence."

Nera opened her hands on the chair arms. The floor between them stayed clear.

"My answer is no."

Trope felt the bruise beneath her ribs before she felt anything else. "To tonight?"

"To building more of a private life with you now."

"Is there a review date?"

"No." Nera's voice did not harden. "A safe no does not owe the requester a schedule."

Salt had dried in a white crescent around the cup's drinking seam.

"Yes," she said.

Nera set the cup nearer Trope's good hand and stood. The answer stayed where she had put it.

A work alert reached both of them before Nera left the alcove. The fragment impact had damaged one provenance sensor beneath the gimbal, and the replacement record needed a field witness before the calibration window.

Nera angled the slate so both women could inspect it.

"I need your account of the hinge before release."

"You have it."

She dragged one chair farther from the other and expanded the source tree. Trope honored the distance. Beyond the glass, the drone carried the bent shielding fragment toward evidence custody.

Together, at the distance Nera had chosen, they led the review with the damaged hinge.

By the following shift, the communications bay smelled of resin, wet cloth, and pepper broth reheated beyond ownership. The room had once been a customs classroom; old desk bolts marked the floor beneath Mika Sen's twelve-meter route map.

Mika painted the final warning bands by hand because projected notices vanished during power loss. From the review table, the oldest human systems formed a pale cluster no larger than Trope's palm.

Nera joined her with one thumbnail wrapped in black tape. "I will remain on Palisade work through cradle review. The personal no remains where I drew it."

"Understood."

"No penalty in assignment, access, protection, or credit. No making distance perform a consent lesson. No later rescue used as evidence that I consented before it."

"Yes."

Mika leaned over the platform rail. "May I interrupt the private constitution? The system has assigned red to cradle review. Red already means fire, decompression, lethal voltage, quarantine, and do not bring your child through this hatch. We are approaching the point where red means the station has opinions."

A father had stopped beneath the wall carrying a sleeping boy whose respirator tube ran into a silver pump. The Tahl clinic beyond the restricted door had fabricated an interface that prevented the tube from abrading his throat.

"The review is real," Nera said. "The color is false."

"I stopped because I thought the clinic was closed," the father said.

Mika powered down the wand. "It is not."

"Then do not paint it red."

The child woke and looked at the pale cluster. "Is that us?"

"The old systems," his father said.

"Where is our house?"

"Too small for the map."

The Tahl-Witness channel lit.

HUMAN CRADLE RELEVANCE UNDER REVIEW

"Does that mean the clinic will not take him?" the father asked.

A Tahl clinician answered from the corridor. "Your appointment remains accepted. Human escort restrictions apply inside continuity-adjacent rooms. Pulmonary care is not continuity access."

"Not today," the father said.

"Not today," the clinician agreed.

"What did we do?"

"Two humans attacked Edge and the continuity system," Trope said. "Human institutions supplied their access and some of their language. Other humans stopped the attack and corrected part of the record. We do not know whether anyone above the attackers authorized it."

"Paint that," the father said.

"There is no color for that sentence," Mika replied.

"Then use more than one."

The boy held the respirator tube. "Red means bad."

"Sometimes red means people need to stop pretending nothing can happen," his father said.

Mika asked what he wanted.

"I want them to know where we are. The clinic made the piece in his throat when our system called the irritation tolerable. If the Tahl are deciding whether humans can hurt them, I do not want a polite color that makes us harmless. I also want the door open."

"Those wants may pull against each other."

"They already do."

The boy touched the cluster. "I want our house on it."

The official layer excluded it. She gave him a removable blue tab for the transparent practice cover. When the clinic opened, he found the right service ring after two mistakes and placed the tab slightly crooked, to his satisfaction.

Mika wiped the red band away before it dried.

The main review moved four decks down to a loading room with an adequate wall and excessive heat. Pavan arrived carrying replacement sensor line and learned in the lift that his standing access to the Tahl continuity bay now required escort.

"I installed half the isolation manifold."

"That history is why your competence remains recognized," Bridge said.

"My species is why I cannot enter alone."

"Yes."

"The manifold knows neither fact."

"The people using it do," Depth replied.

A Tahl technician left Edge's support team to escort him, delaying another repair. Sterile polymer for Edge's clinic then spent seven minutes at a second provenance check. Tessa Vale gripped the pallet handle.

"These are for the person whose injury triggered the restriction, and the restriction delays them. Put that in the packet before anyone calls the rule costless."

Pell logged both burdens.

A junior analyst proposed automated tracking instead of human escort. Pavan objected to letting a model that had mistaken Sera's brace for a rifle decide whether he behaved like a safe human.

"Different model," the analyst said.

"That is what every model says at introduction."

The analyst's practical case survived: tracking preserved clinical labor. Nera named the loop before the room could mistake convenience for proof.

Rooms became restricted because the behavior model existed; then the model became necessary because the rooms were restricted.

"I would prefer an escort who can insult my workmanship in person," Pavan said.

The Tahl technician beside him said, "I can do that."

People laughed because the problem had not made them less alive.

Pell laid the classification ladder on the table as physical strips: local incident, archive relevance, route relevance, defensive relevance, cradle relevance under review, final cradle finding. A separate black strip marked **RETALIATION AUTHORIZED** sat twenty centimeters away.

"This distance is not decoration."

The revised protocol allowed immutable evidence, stronger authentication, inspection, escort, denial, and defensive hardening around Tahl systems. It allowed analysis of biospheres, archives, industry, logistics, and routes. It authorized no sabotage, kinetic launch, target selection, or weapon release.

Human systems appeared on the dependency map as points and links. Nothing looked like a firing solution, although all of it could become useful to one.

"They are painting the cradle," the analyst said.

"No," Mika replied. "I am painting the wall. They are deciding what the paint may mean."

By the pause, she had replaced red with narrow amber hatching broken so the roads remained visible. Beneath it she placed two equal statements:

REVIEW CHANGES ACCESS AND DEFENSIVE ASSUMPTIONS.

REVIEW DOES NOT AUTHORIZE ATTACK.

Someone added **HOME IS NOT A TARGET.** Another hand answered **EDGE WAS NOT A SYMBOL EITHER.** Mika left both.

Rook increased protection around the mast, archives, claimants, and gate controls and left every weapon outside preemptive posture.

"A classification is not a target," he said.

Marr pointed to the model. "A later commander can drink from it after catastrophe changes the question."

"Then preserve the correction path," Rook said. "You still need a target before you shoot."

Marr was unconvinced and did not perform agreement for the record.

Nera rebuilt the den-theft access chain as separate transparent tiles. Soll's credential genuinely exposed service shadows, claimant routes, Edge's schedule, continuity interfaces, and authentication topology distributed for protection. Kelm's custodian authority validly permitted thermal-service orders. Identity checks, patrol inspection, and access controls functioned until two authenticated people repurposed those permissions after admission.

Pavan returned with seal compound on one sleeve. "So the answer is fewer people know how to save us."

"Narrower purpose access," Nera said.

"The machine still needed someone who knew the old coupling was filed crooked."

The argument did not resolve into secrecy or openness. Protection needed readable routes; their legibility enlarged the number of people who could misuse them. The revised design separated purpose, reduced standing groups, and required a named person at each access. Betrayal remained possible.

Command records entered on their own tiles. HOC-PAL, Marr's approved brief, survival rhetoric, and the choice to place human chronology and correction behind a human-first surface formed **COMMAND CLIMATE**, not authorization, knowledge, or established encouragement.

"Leave that limit where people can see it," Marr said.

Nera did.

Kelm's voluntary statement established recruitment, false work-order authorship, transport, clamp duty, and receipt of Soll's package. Kelm said Soll believed command had clarified the stakes while avoiding responsibility. She had no direct contact with Marr, and no evidence established hidden encouragement.

Marr accepted that command credentials, access design, protection derivatives, and survival language enabled the attack. He required evidence of instruction, knowledge, approval, or encouragement before accepting authorship of the attack.

"Humans also stopped it," he said. "If you classify the species from institutional failure and call correction an exception, you have chosen the conclusion."

Bridge answered, "If correction leads and enablement hides in an annex, you have also chosen."

The packet teams returned to Mika's bay, where every summary required a first surface. The Alectan brief led with unauthorized actors, Tahl strategy, and human correction. Mika painted six hands instead of heroes: Trope's finger straight along the trigger guard after the dangerous function ceased, Mills's cutter, Rook's signed order, Nera's source tiles, Pell's seal, Mara's grease-marked chronology.

She left a seventh panel empty.

"What is that?" Marr asked.

"Authorship absent from your opening surface."

"It is in the annex."

"So is much of your responsibility."

He added his approval line to the first page. Nera also required **NO EXPLICIT SUPERIOR ORDER RECOVERED** to stand beside **AUTHORIZATION UNKNOWN**, preventing a true negative finding from impersonating exoneration.

The Tahl packet led with Edge's damaged support geometry and the assembled frame. It preserved the human attack, enabling access, Kelm's hearsay, and unknown authorization, but also Tahl first-flag strategy, Edge's assent, Depth's objection, concentrated body-local risk, and the humans who stopped the attack. Mika moved Depth's objection and the limit to two identified humans and one device onto the first surface.

"That changes the requested emphasis," Bridge said.

"It changes what a person sees before deciding what your species did."

"The packet is not an art referendum."

"No. It is an object whose first page enters before its annexes."

Trope required source, scope, uncertainty, dissent, and revision to travel with every classification. Pell's contradiction packet linked both briefs to chronology, HOC-PAL, Tahl strategy, den-theft evidence, Edge's medical record, Kelm's statement, human counteraction, Aster's terms, and unresolved fields.

Outside, the father returned carrying his waking son. The blue tab remained on the practice cover.

"Can they use it to find us?" the boy asked, looking at the amber hatching.

"Yes," Mika said.

"Can they hurt us?"

"The review does not permit it."

"Why are the lines broken?"

"So the road underneath does not disappear."

The boy moved the tab one centimeter because he had decided their house was nearer the clinic.

"I still want us painted in," his father said.

"You are," Mika replied. "The argument is over what the paint can command."

The three packets remained separately authored and linked. Marr wanted the human brief first because first receipt becomes a lens. Seliath wanted the injured claimant's warning not to wait behind the institution under review. Edge emphasized injury; Depth resisted a species conclusion from two attackers; Bridge emphasized the cost if wider systems never registered the event.

"The voices are not votes," Pell said.

"No. The disagreement belongs to one person."

Rook required each transmitted header to expose the other packets, omission notices, source maps, and unresolved fields. He did not choose release authority or order before an actual aperture and security state existed.

Near the end of shift, Trope received a nonurgent task to inspect W-9's brace: the direct route required one unsupported transfer, while the slower sequence used a crawler rail, a double tether, and seventeen additional minutes.

She opened Nera's personal channel before committing either route.

"The brace inspection is nonurgent," Trope said. "The direct path has one unsupported transfer. A slower route is available. Failure at that transfer would enter your life."

Paper shifted over Nera's pickup while she read the work plan.

"Take the slower sequence," she said.

Trope did.

The crawler rail objected to every joint with a metallic complaint. Halfway out, its service speaker announced that the unit was operating within acceptable acoustic limits.

"It is lying," Trope said.

Mills answered from rescue standby. "It has learned institutional language."

The inspection took longer and found no new fault. Trope returned with full reserve and an ache from the crawler rail's vibration.

Nera was still at the packet table. Trope sent her the brace measurements; Nera acknowledged them and went back to the source map.

All three packets waited unreleased while Mika's wall carried the amber field, broken lines, roads beneath, and two incompatible placards. The child's blue tab remained on the practice cover until clinic close. When Mika peeled it off, a blue corner stayed under her thumbnail.

The gate remained black. Clinic traffic passed beneath Mika's broken amber lines, and the weapons stayed in their racks.

Above them, the official wall still carried the cradle under review.

CHAPTER 15

The Open Mouth

The gate began as heat in equipment that had spent years pretending it was only equipment.

At Relay Mast W-9, pumps climbed through their test bands while technicians cleared leads from a widening amber line. One retrieved a torque collar left beneath the pedestal.

"Tools clear," Pavan said.

The technician held it up.

"Then the tools have entered doctrinal uncertainty."

One breath of laughter passed. W-9 was counting null drift, debris, timing residuals, coolant margin, and three separately authenticated packet queues whose authors each believed the others could not safely go first.

The Alectan brief waited in violet. The Tahl cradle packet lay beside it. The Witness contradiction archive remained sealed inside WC-1 under Pell's custody. Their headers acknowledged one another. Release authority remained empty.

Beyond the mast, the black null returned no light. Trope lay behind a firing rest forty-three meters from the neutral pedestal, the stock finding the bruise beneath her shoulder. Mills occupied the second rest with a cold cup marked **NOT EVIDENCE**.

GSV-2 governed bodies, tools, power, and motion around the gate. Nearby evidence belonged elsewhere, as did title, species guilt, firstness, and public belief. On paper the boundary was exact. On the deck it was an amber stripe wide enough for a boot.

Marr issued his directive before the final technician crossed out of the amber volume.

He stood on Platform One with his left hand around the command rail. "Alectan gate security will secure the human packet and every Alectan transmission surface. Unadjudicated archive media will remain isolated from gate controls. No packet acquires priority because its custodians carried it nearer to the aperture."

Pell answered from the archive vestibule. He had not slept enough to conceal it. His collar sat crooked, and one side of his hair had accepted the shape of a folded coat. "Gate security doesn't become evidence custody because the evidence is near a gate."

"A cradle classification can survive the argument that produced it," Marr said. "The first packet may be copied into guardians, colonies, delayed archives, and defense systems that never receive the correction. WC-1 contains personnel records, medical histories, family material, security architecture, command evidence, and allegations no court has tested. If it docks first, physical sequence becomes political sequence."

"Docking publishes nothing."

"It establishes position."

"Yes," Pell said. "Because your security order would otherwise establish possession."

Marr indicated the black core behind the vestibule door. "You hear seizure in every safety boundary."

"I hear it when the boundary puts armed personnel between a custodian and the thing in his care."

"The archive is not a child."

"No. Children are usually easier to identify as people."

Pell's sentence landed badly enough that he winced at his own mouth. He rubbed two fingers over his eyes and tried again.

"The core may be dangerous," he said. "Then establish the function, inspect the core, constrain its route, and hold every release surface safe. Being close to it doesn't make it yours."

Marr's strongest case required no invented attack. First receipt was irreversible. The source-complete archive contained private lives and unresolved accusations. A locked object beside the gate might acquire practical priority before any hearing awarded it legal priority. He named those dangers plainly, without turning the Tahl into monsters or Pell into a conspirator.

Pell authorized movement anyway. WC-1 would leave the central vault, cross the neutral corridor, and dock at the pedestal beyond unilateral Alectan seizure. Its optical coupler would stay shuttered and its release key absent. Docking would publish nothing, but the place where it stopped would matter.

Before accepting overwatch, Trope opened a private channel to Nera.

No image appeared. The channel carried cooling fans, a drawer shutting, and the small ceramic sound of a cup set down harder than necessary. Nera had told her no. They still worked together. Neither fact had become a metaphor for the other.

"Moving the archive may put my rifle between Alectan personnel and Witness custody," Trope said. "I may have to use force near your room."

Nera was silent long enough to read the route map. "You are addressing me before commitment."

"Yes."

"That's better." Her voice stayed tired. "The assignment is still yours."

"I know."

"If they approach, take Rook's protection structure seriously. Do not let urgency name a target for you."

"I won't."

"You cannot promise the outcome."

"No."

Another drawer opened; paper whispered across metal. "My no is still no. My help is still help. One doesn't enlarge the other."

"Understood."

"Then accept because you judge the assignment lawful, not because I've made danger convenient for you."

Trope placed her name beneath the overwatch order. "Accepted."

The archive door opened. Two Witness custodians emerged with cooling line and tamper seals, one still carrying a blanket crease across his cheek. The hose caught at the threshold.

"Lift the elbow," Pavan called. "The braid did nothing to deserve this."

WC-1 followed in a four-handled frame: forty-six kilograms of armor, write-once banks, thermal control, attestations, and a correction history long enough to bend everyone carrying it. The optical coupler remained shuttered. The core had no radio, propulsion, weapon aperture, or declared gate authority.

Bridge took the weight alone. The gait still favored an old pressure injury.

"Depth remains body-near Edge while Edge is unstable. Seliath commits this movement through Bridge," Bridge said.

"You could use a cart," Marr said.

"The cart would be taken at the line."

"That is an accusation."

"It is also the route analysis. Do not improve the arrangement by calling this body equipment. Do not improve us by pretending we did not choose the burden."

Pell published pace, inspection surfaces, and destination. Bridge would cross the edge of GSV-2 and dock at the neutral pedestal on a route clear of weapons, timing racks, the abort bus, and field controls. The route passed close enough to each that a hostile turn would matter.

As Bridge advanced, Pell's lawful route met Marr's lawful safety volume. Tactical fusion produced categories faster than knowledge: archive core, command package, transmission object, continuity substrate, unknown powered mass. It found no explosive, weapon bus, hostile propulsion, targeting illumination, or unusual power demand.

Alectan security ordered Bridge to stop. Pell allowed full remote inspection but no custody transfer. Bridge slowed voluntarily, exposed every surface, and preserved the route.

Through the optic, Trope framed body, core, pedestal, and amber crossing in one field. The firing solution turned green. She could make the shot; the useful line passed through Bridge's load-bearing center into WC-1.

Marr invoked unresolved authority, possible gate command, possible release seizure, and the loss of a clean window after zone entry.

"Dangerous function is not established," Pell said.

"Trope," Marr ordered, "if WC-1 enters before positive classification, fire."

Marr's order came through a valid chain. Under Rook's protection structure, Trope possessed conditional authority if the target existed.

"Can you make the shot?" Mills asked.

"Yes."

"Would the order authorize it if the target existed?"

"Yes."

"Does it?"

Bridge maintained constant pace. The shutter stayed closed. No hostile power rise, targeting light, acceleration, deployment, gate command, forced interface, or turn toward control hardware appeared.

"No."

Trope cast her conditions onto the common wall. A weapon signature, hostile power rise, forced interface, hostile course change, gate-control command, or attack on personnel would establish a new target.

"Your clean window is closing," Marr said.

"Yes."

"If refusal gives the archive physical priority, that consequence belongs to you."

"It will carry my name."

Bridge crossed the amber line.

The core reached the far side of the amber stripe. No alarm changed pitch. Bridge's gait still favored the injured joint.

WC-1 entered GSV-2 before the inspection completed. The neutral pedestal could now receive it before the human packet acquired physical firstness. Platform One changed posture. Four Alectan security personnel left their assigned stations and advanced toward Nera's sequencer room. A mobility sled unlocked behind them.

Marr issued a second directive. "Gate security will isolate the Witness sequencer, secure its control surfaces, and prevent unadjudicated transmission."

The team advanced with rifles low. An override relay unfolded from the sled and probed the outer Witness interfaces.

Nera had physically safed every release function. "Nothing's transmitting, and nothing is authorized to transmit. Your directive doesn't authorize surrender of the sequencer, WC-1, or the Witness originals."

Pell added, "Supervised access remains available. Seizure does not."

Rook took the common channel. "All armed approach to Witness control is suspended pending compact review. Claimant protection, evidence protection, and gate safety remain active. Team lead, acknowledge."

The lead officer looked toward Platform One. His name, Ilyan Ko, appeared beside a service record that included twelve years in gate security and one disciplinary finding for leaving a post to carry a burned worker through an unpressurized section.

"Hold received," Ko said.

Marr answered on command. "Continue isolation. The hold exceeds local compact authority inside an active Alectan gate volume."

Rook did not raise his voice. "Captain, my protection authority is signed by every party currently relying on this room not to become a battlefield. Your jurisdictional objection is entered. Team lead, stop."

Ko's jaw worked once. The team advanced.

Their muzzles pointed down. Trope did not fire.

"Gate-security team," she said, "weapon alignment, forced breach, active override seizure, or continued powered advance after this warning will establish targets. The target will be the observed function where the geometry permits."

The mobility sled rolled at walking pace.

Trope opened Nera's private channel. "Disabling fire may produce fragments, smoke, and control loss in your room."

Nera answered before the channel tone cleared. "Three people. Pell's at the inner wall, I'm behind the sequencer, and Orra is in the floor recess because the floor recess has apparently become a moral commitment."

A muffled voice behind her said, "That's where the fiber terminates."

Nera said, "Safest fragment path is high left of the vestibule actuator. The override relay shares conduit with one redundant archive-control path."

"Received."

"That is geometry."

"I know."

Ko's rifle rose.

Its fire-control track swept across the sequencer wall and settled over Nera's console. At the vestibule, a powered breach tool engaged the locked actuator after Rook's hold. The override relay escalated from handshake requests to an active seize command. Behind them, the mobility sled accelerated toward the bypass corridor.

Four possible targets became four observed functions.

Mills used the spare cadence they had learned under fire, clean enough to hide almost anything. "Lead weapon active; vestibule motor loaded. Override is carrying seize, and the rear sled still has power."

Trope fired.

The first round struck the rifle's power coupling. The track vanished before the weapon discharged. Ceramic and hot conductor burst into Ko's hand and forearm. He dropped to one knee behind the rifle, fingers closing on air while the smell of scorched glove reached the balcony a moment later through the extraction current.

Recoil entered Trope's bruised shoulder. She was already moving to the second line.

"High left clear," Mills said.

The next round struck the vestibule actuator at its fail-closed arrest point. The breach motor stopped so violently that its reaction arm threw the operator shoulder-first into the bulkhead. The door resisted. On the other side, Nera's breath broke once across the channel and steadied.

"Override is no longer requesting," Mills said. "It is writing."

Trope's third shot severed the relay path. Arc light filled the service gap, blue-white and almost beautiful, then became smoke. One redundant Witness archive-control route went black on Nera's display.

The rear sled advanced. The trooper beside it kept one hand on the manual drive rail and the other clear of his holstered weapon. The powered mass was still carrying personnel toward the bypass after the hold, warning, and three shots. Trope shifted to the drive housing.

"Lower occupied space clear," Mills said. "Spall right."

She fired a fourth time.

The magnetic housing locked against the deck. The sled slewed half a meter and stopped with an ugly sideways jolt. Metal spall opened the lower suit leg of the nearest trooper. Blood darkened the fabric before the person beside him dropped and clamped both hands over the wound.

Silence did not get a turn. Alarms, smoke extraction, weapon-safe orders, medical requests, archive failures, and someone swearing through a burned hand filled the chamber at once.

Mills left his rest and crossed to the exposed corridor, tracking hands, dropped weapons, and renewed motion rather than uniforms. "Lead weapon is down, the door held, the override is dead, and the rear team is immobilized. Medical lane stays clear if everyone stays put."

Bridge had halted beside the pedestal, still bearing WC-1.

"Can you maintain it?" Mills asked.

"Yes."

"Do not demonstrate heroism to a man with a bad wrist."

"Is your wrist bad?"

"It has submitted documentation."

Bridge lowered one side of the frame the width of a finger, sharing the strain with a support pad until an evidence custodian could approach.

Inside the sequencer room, Nera rerouted control around the destroyed relay. She repeated one checksum, stopped, and corrected herself. "Primary sequencer and release path are safe. WC-1 has no link, and we lost one redundant archive-control route. I need medical access for Ko's hand, the shoulder impact, and the lower-leg bleed."

Rook ordered every weapon safe in the common volume. "The intervention is under my command responsibility. Medics and evidence custodians enter now; nobody else moves until I release them."

The surviving team safed under protest. Nera left the vestibule closed until the smoke path cleared, then opened the same door the breach tool had failed to force. Medics crossed it carrying irrigation fluid, splints, cutters, and the small ordinary violence by which clothing is removed from an injured body.

Ko was younger without the set of command in his face. The medic cooled his hand and forearm while he watched her pick fragments from the glove.

"Will it work?" he asked.

"I don't know yet."

Ko kept Platform One in view beyond her. "I heard both orders."

"I know," she said. "Hold still."

The trooper with the leg wound apologized for bleeding across the amber boundary. Pavan told him the paint had failed inspection before the blood arrived and therefore remained free of moral injury. The shoulder casualty tried to stand, discovered the station had become argumentative in more than one direction, and sat back down.

No one had died. The burned-polymer smell stayed.

Trope logged each injury before the tactical pane could compress them into amber icons. Her first shot had disabled a weapon and burned a hand. Her second had arrested a breach and driven a shoulder into steel. Her third had protected the sequencer and destroyed an archive-control path. Her fourth had immobilized a moving team and opened a leg.

Marr came down from Platform One but stopped outside the medical lane.

From below the balcony, he said, "You fired on Alectan security."

"I fired on a weapon alignment, breach motor, active seize command, and powered advance after warning."

"Those functions belonged to people."

"Yes."

"Don't make restraint innocent by counting only the people you didn't kill."

Trope entered the sentence into her force record.

The gate opened while the room still smelled of conductor smoke and blood.

Black became a white vertical vault. Direct stellar light crossed Palisade for the first time in years, gold on the deck, wrong-way shadows under equipment, illuminated dust, and two raised hands in neighboring rooms. The Bracken technician beyond the aperture wore no ceremonial dress. She checked a panel, waited for local acknowledgment, and raised one open palm.

Pumps, medics, and maintenance crews worked on after wonder arrived. Pressure stayed within band. Medics stabilized Ko. Pavan removed the torque collar from quarantine and discovered it had become relevant only to a maintenance note.

Marr's Human Continuity carrier already possessed a registered wavelength and ACI-4 waiting beyond the Mouth. Pell's archive remained sealed.

Pell kept one hand on WC-1's seal. "First receipt will privilege your structure."

"First receipt preserves a human government's ability to speak before a source-complete archive exports private lives and unresolved accusations beyond recall," Marr replied.

"It also exports your arrangement of what matters."

"Yes. Government is an arrangement of what matters. The remedy is accountable authorship, not silence while an adversarial archive takes first position."

Mara answered from the coolant manifold. "The archive did not wake up and choose a side."

"It was built to contradict my account."

"Your account required contradiction, so we built it."

"Both can be true."

Marr transmitted.

A thin violet carrier crossed the Mouth. ACI-4 acknowledged each group by checksum. The header named Soll and Kelm as unauthorized actors

and credited human correction. Tahl strategy and cradle relevance appeared early. HOC-PAL, access enablement, command climate, and authorization unknown remained in annexes whose contradiction records had not arrived.

Nera pushed WC-1's manifest toward the aperture without opening a protected byte. The array refused it: release authority absent, Witness carrier under security hold, wavelength collision, and one redundancy path destroyed by Trope's third shot.

"Zero outbound."

Marr's carrier moved on. "The zero is not mine alone."

"No," Nera said. "It is real."

First receipt governed while the linked records were dark.

Mills opened a maintenance panel beneath W-9. "Independent parallax return through PRC-2. We'll have enough width if the bracket survives closure."

He needed twelve centimeters and had seven. Mara killed a local pump, caught the pressure change, and forced the access tray down with her shoulder.

"The machine was built by people who considered maintenance a character flaw," she said.

"Most elegant machines are."

"Don't become philosophical under my coolant line."

The hot fiber marked Mills's wrist. Mara seated the bracket with the heel of her tool.

"That was not a measurement," he said.

"It was a relationship."

Rook signed a narrow safety clearance. Nera sent a test manifest containing no identity, allegation, medical fact, or source. WEQ-2 returned the checksum. A road existed now, narrow and unauthorized; Pell's release field stayed blank while the window fell to eleven minutes.

"Say the cost aloud," Trope told him.

Pell stood beside WC-1. "Protected medical and claimant records. Families, victims, attackers, security paths, limited-purpose testimony, source identities, and allegations no court has tested. Once copied through that aperture, ordinary recall ends."

He named the unresolved fields: authorization, title, Edge's outcome, the failed windows, Aster. "Those aren't decorative caveats."

Nera divided the archive into a public contradiction spine, protected evidence under WEQ-2 keys, and claimant and medical envelopes under PCM-3 keys. The split existed because Marr had once rejected a single emergency key as a hostage to whichever office held it. Nera had opposed his remedy then. She used it now. All bytes could cross while plaintext remained compartmented. The boundaries reduced exposure; they did not abolish it. Keys could be copied, law could change, and sealed identities could be inferred.

Across the Mouth, Marr's packet was already entering systems Palisade could not inspect.

Seliath authorized its strategy, Edge's assent, Depth's objection, Bridge's reasoning, and cradle-review sources under claimant limits. Mara authorized her testimony, raw chronology, and habitat records.

"Seliath's body crossed first," she said. "Eighty-four seconds before me. Humanity's First Presence is not a physical fact. I retain the complete-self argument and the human claim. I am not buying truth by surrendering the case."

ACI-4 reported Marr's brief complete.

"The zero-release condition is gone," Trope said. "A supportable but incomplete account is now the only inspectable record beyond Palisade. A link cannot contradict while the linked source remains dark."

Marr descended from Platform One. "First receipt is not final judgment. Do not answer an argument by exporting every private life in the case."

"That is not the structure," Nera said.

"It is the consequence. You can separate keys at release, not copied existence."

"One decision of silence can also make a source dead," Pell said.

Marr addressed Trope. "You believe completeness cures framing?"

"No."

"Then what are you buying?"

"The possibility that someone can answer the records arranged behind your first page."

"And if nobody listens?"

"Then the archive fails in public instead of succeeding only in custody," Pell said. "That is not comfort."

With nine minutes left, Pell dictated the conditions: partial release already governing; provenance and uncertainty preserved; access divided by source and consent; no lesser remedy inside the window; a named custodian answerable for release and foreseeable misuse.

He signed.

"My name, this window, and this changed condition. It isn't transparency forever."

Rook secured Nera, Mills, Pell, WC-1, and the manual isolation controls while leaving the medical lane open. "Safety is green, custody is Pell's, and source consent is claimant-specific. Execute only inside those scopes."

Nera authenticated each authority separately and locked the root manifest. WC-1 clicked beneath her hand. PRC-2 caught the carrier, lost it for half a second, and stabilized.

The contradiction spine crossed first: custody manifest, raw and legal chronology, HOC-PAL, Marr's approval, and the redline where interpretation entered a surface presented as fact. Tahl strategy followed under Seliath's authorization, with Edge's assent beside Depth's objection. Den-theft records separated acts, institutional enablement, command climate, hearsay, missing proof, and **AUTHORIZATION UNKNOWN**.

Marr filed a shutdown request naming private records, unresolved allegations, exposed architecture, weakened bargaining position, and consequences that would outlast any recall after closure. Nothing in it was

frivolous. The array rejected unilateral shutdown because Pell held custody authority and Rook governed safety.

Soll's body record, Aster's offer, the human and Tahl briefs, omission maps, and force telemetry followed. Above the medical lane, Ko vomited inside his mask while protected records about other injured bodies streamed overhead.

Marr left Platform One and walked toward Manual Optical Isolation Handle MOI-2.

"Stop," Rook said.

"I am preserving formal protest. The release remains unadjudicated."

"You filed the protest. The array received it."

"The act continues."

"So does my order."

Trope shouldered the rifle. "Operating MOI-2 establishes an active closure function. The target will be the hand or linkage applying force if geometry permits."

Exhaustion roughened Marr's face; conviction straightened his posture. "You will shoot the human commander while the human account is outside and the human cradle under review."

"If you pull the handle, I will stop the pull."

"You have made a doctrine of smaller targets."

"No. I have a hand on a handle."

His right hand closed around MOI-2.

"Do not."

He pulled.

Trope rejected the housing because a strike might drive the shutter shut and rejected his chest because the active danger was smaller than his body. She fired through the hand applying force.

The station-safe round broke his grip. Rook caught him and returned the handle to safe while medics packed the wound. Trope safed the rifle and dictated the facts before the world removed the image: right hand, moving linkage, rising attenuation, sight line across skin, recoil entering the old bruise.

"Enter that I was warned," Marr said.

"I did."

"Enter that I understood."

She added it.

The partial pull bent PRC-2 out of alignment. Mills and Mara forced the tray down, reset the beam, and retransmitted only the missing ranges. Bridge braced the bypass. Nera preserved original sequence identities and refused the green completion banner.

"One frame absent," she said.

"Range?" Mills asked.

"Force record. Final active-function group."

The missing frame concealed the violence that had secured the archive's road. They transmitted that exact range beneath its original identity.

WEQ-2 and PCM-3 confirmed every group and protected envelope. The receipts offered no verdict. They showed only that the records had arrived somewhere Palisade could no longer pull them back.

Marr's brief remained first in receipt order. The complete archive could answer it now, provided anyone chose to listen. Nothing in the checksum restored the spent privacy, healed Edge, explained the failed windows, or decided what Marr's broken hand should mean.

ROOT CHECKSUM ACCEPTED.

Nera capped the coupler. Across the aperture, the Bracken technician raised her palm again. Nera returned it.

From white vault to vertical strip to gold thread across Marr's blood, the aperture narrowed. Then the thread went out.

The Open Mouth closed. Ko's blood remained on the amber stripe, Marr's brief remained first, and the room had no way to call back what it had sent.

CHAPTER 16

Joint Custody

The first authenticated return aperture brought regenerative catalyst for Edge on a cart whose left wheel screamed through every legal greeting. The clinic porter kicked it straight without slowing. Jurist Saye read the temperature history aloud while replacement panels and restricted records crowded the aperture; Palisade left two habitat panels behind to make room for the medicine.

Twenty-nine days after the root checksum crossed into Bracken custody, W-9 had cooled into ordinary machinery. Marr's right hand rested in a reconstructive frame. Edge's clinic board carried three red fields. At the cargo bench, a clerk labeled the catalyst **HUMAN CONTINUITY TRANSFER**. Jurist Saye read the strip once, peeled it off, and handed it back.

"Source first," she said.

The clerk fed a new strip into the printer.

Eleven days after Saye's arrival, a Tahl opening brought route delegates, laminae, and a support rack whose coupling had been installed backward. A Tahl technician repaired it in four minutes of professional shame, consuming the final cargo interval. The rack reached Edge intact, which was meaning enough for the morning.

Both windows closed cleanly. The delegates remained at Palisade with only the authority their credentials, memory, and bodies could carry.

Saye could bind provisional Alectan obligations and preserve appeal. She could not surrender Mara's personal claim or rewrite Palisade from Bracken. Nhal could bind specified Tahl institutions, but could not speak over Seliath or erase the strategy that sent Edge first.

"Archive access?" Pell asked.

"Evidence," Saye said.

"Not command," Nhal replied.

Only after the limits were spoken did anyone bring chairs.

The hearing chamber had been arranged as an authority map rather than a summit. Pell's station carried evidence, procedure, and unresolved fields. Rook's station held safety, emergency expiry, and no-fire discipline. Mara and Seliath occupied separate claimant positions. Technical staff sat nearest the air, power, clinic, and route displays, because a legal sentence could not keep a membrane from tearing. Witness House custody clerks maintained the source walls, keeping each claim beside its source and named author. Trope stood at the rear of Rook's line with her rifle cased and her hands empty.

No head occupied the linked table.

Its center was blank except for a circular access plate somebody had polished for the occasion. Mills placed his cup on it. An attendant moved the

cup to a side shelf. Five minutes later a clerk set a ceremonial seal in the same place, and Pell moved the seal to the same shelf beside the cup.

Pell left his hand beside the cleared plate. "Nothing sits there."

The clerk compared the empty center with the shelf where the cup and seal had become unwilling colleagues. "Is that symbolic?"

"It is load access."

The clerk accepted this with the expression of a person who preferred symbolism but had met maintenance before.

Pell laid out the raw clocks: Edge first, Mara eighty-four seconds later, the broad human habitat after that, fuller Seliath continuity later still. He locked the sequence. "Now we can disagree on an honest clock."

Saye argued that Mara had arrived as an integrated, death-bearing person answerable to a habitat. Mara refused the untouched image; dependence was visible in her pumps and lungs.

"Do not turn my innocence into a reason I win."

Nhal answered from Edge's consent, fear, labor, and body-local loss. Mara answered that Seliath had chosen the least mass capable of carrying the claim.

"Yes," Bridge said. "The strategy and the life are both real."

Saye accused Seliath of concentrating unique risk while keeping survival elsewhere.

"We retained other life," Bridge said. "We did not retain Edge's exact life."

"You wanted the rule," Mara said.

"We wanted recognition. We wanted human law to meet a person it had not described."

"And control," Pell said.

"And control."

The ventilation stepped down. Mills moved his cup so it would stop vibrating against the ceremonial seal.

Saye proposed language calling the failures balanced. Pell rejected it. Marr's alteration of the record and the Tahl mission's use of embodiment were not matching sins merely because both claims remained difficult.

"Then what supports joint custody?" Mara asked.

"The narrower fact," Pell said. "Neither claim may exclude the other automatically."

A warning tone sounded from the environmental board.

Mara was facing it before the technical officer spoke. Shared Exchange Manifold Three had begun drifting out of balance between the human habitat loop and the Tahl continuity volume. The deviation was small, but the line supplied emergency cross-support to both spaces. The human side controlled the pressure regulator. The Tahl side controlled the adaptive membrane. Witness House owned the sensor package that could prove neither side had quietly changed the baseline.

At the maintenance hatch, Pavan held a torque tool in one hand and an access key in the other. A Tahl technician crouched opposite him, its nearest handling limb tucked close to avoid crossing the yellow interface without

permission. Between them, a pressure line no wider than Trope's wrist carried enough shared atmosphere to make the hearing suddenly honest.

"Can you isolate it?" Rook asked.

"Either side can stop the flow," Mara said. "Neither side can restart it safely without all three systems."

Saye checked the unsigned compact. "Current emergency authority?"

"Expires in nineteen minutes," Pell said.

"Renew it."

Mara faced her. "Under whose sovereignty?"

No one answered for several seconds.

Pavan raised the key. "I have a pipe developing opinions."

"It is not developing opinions," Mara said.

"It is expressing them through pressure."

The Tahl technician's translator produced a brief clicking phrase. Nhal listened and said, "The membrane agrees with the pipe."

A brief laugh moved through the room. The pressure climbed another point.

The crisis category that had protected Edge could not schedule maintenance, assign labor, or keep ninety days of air moving. Pavan stood at the hatch with two keys and permission from no one.

Pell opened a blank field: CONTINUING EMBODIED PRESENCE. The index shortened it to CEP.

"You are writing ontology during a pressure warning," Saye said.

"I'm keeping ontology from becoming the reason nobody can turn a key."

He wrote only what the pipe required: a living local body or voice, authenticated as part of a continuing person; voluntary commitment to remain or act; capacity to bear labor, restriction, risk, liability, and consequence.

Depth joined from Edge's ward. "The local locus cannot be spent as evidence."

"Or as a title token," Mara said.

Bridge required body-local experience and dissent to remain visible. Depth's clinic monitor sounded once before the voice returned. "Loss here is personal and irreversible. Do not call it whole-person death. Do not let survival elsewhere erase it."

Pell attached protection, residence, duty, hearing, and appeal. The field gave continuity no victory over death.

The pressure warning shifted from amber to red.

Saye touched the complete-self field. "Mara reserves the doctrine."

Mara tapped her own chest. "I reserve it myself, along with controlled residence and my claim."

Pell nodded.

Through the transparent partition, Mara tracked Pavan and the Tahl technician. Both were tracking the same rising number while the people behind them searched for a sentence large enough to permit a small act.

"I accept that Seliath is not legally absent," she said. "I accept protection, duty, residence, work, and appeal. I do not accept that Edge's timestamp settles final title."

Bridge lowered the body just enough to keep the translation aperture level with Mara's face.

"Seliath accepts CEP. We preserve physical firstness, our claim, and appeal. We accept no automatic exclusive title."

Pell granted the standing. On the wall, one line branched through Edge, Depth, and Bridge: living local loci, voice-local testimony, person-level commitment, and real local loss. The table could have as many rows as it wanted; Seliath remained one person.

Rook pointed toward the hatch. "Now govern the pipe."

The Palisade Interim Joint Custody Compact opened across the wall, still mostly blank.

Pell asked for the source of the emergency support.

"Human pressure loop," Pavan said over maintenance channel. "Tahl membrane capacity. Witness sensor record."

"Scope?"

"Current imbalance only."

"Consent?"

Mara authenticated the human regulator. Bridge authenticated the Tahl membrane. Pell released the Witness sensor under his own name.

"Replacement duty?"

"The side whose component fails supplies equivalent stock," Mara said. "Labor divided by actual access time."

Through Nhal, the Tahl technician objected. Its membrane had been forced outside design range by a human regulator schedule written before the Tahl volume existed.

Mara drew the pressure history toward her. "Then the failure source decides stock, while actual access time decides labor."

Pavan said, "I'd like the record to note that the machine presently trying to kill us has no species."

"It isn't trying to kill us," Mara said.

"Then it's failing inclusively."

That one did make the clerk laugh. The sound died as soon as the pressure moved again.

"Expiry?" Rook asked.

"Verified balance plus one full cycle," Pavan said.

Rook signed the narrow action. "Proceed."

The Tahl technician crossed the yellow interface first because its body had the correct tool angle. Pavan inserted the regulator key while Pell opened the Witness sensor; Mara watched the human loop and Bridge took the Tahl diagnostic position. The key turned against resistance, stopped, and needed a second hand.

Pavan called through the hatch. "Mara."

She left the claimant station and took the tool above his grip. On the other side, the Tahl technician unfolded another limb around the

membrane brace. Three authorities, two kinds of body, one sensor record, and a pipe unimpressed by constitutional history.

"Quarter turn," Pavan said.

Mara moved the regulator.

The Tahl technician altered membrane tension. Bridge called the pressure. Pell's sensor preserved each change in separate custody fields. The red line fell by two points, hesitated, and rose one.

"Again," Pavan said.

They repeated the sequence. The regulator gave with a small metal complaint. Pressure moved toward center.

When the manifold steadied, nobody returned to the old seating. Mara stayed at the hatch; the Tahl technician kept one limb on the brace. Pell wrote the compact around work already happening.

Human habitation remained Mara's claim. Tahl habitation and continuity space remained Seliath's. Neither volume became sovereign territory. Shared systems had to name source, scope, consent, replacement duty, and expiry; no party could manufacture dependence to strengthen title.

The common zone would carry pressure labels, hazard bands, maintenance identifiers, and no species flag.

"The flag fittings are already installed," the clerk said.

"Leave them empty," Mara replied.

"They'll look unfinished."

"They are unfinished."

"Visible incompletion is accurate," Bridge said.

The compact barred expulsion, life-support deprivation, transfer, disassembly, confinement, or silencing except under narrow safety necessity. Common security, route scheduling, and the archive belonged to no single claimant. Aster's general administration remained refused; final title remained for another hearing. Review would recur, but appeal could not stop air without a written safety condition.

When the manifold turned green, Pavan took the cup Mills had left beside the ceremonial seal.

Mills raised one finger. "Temporary beverage authority: one sip, no precedent."

Pavan drank half.

Pell barred both delegations from answering the next question.

"Mara Venn. Do you remain?"

Mara stood beside the opened hatch rather than at her claimant station. A stripe of dust marked one knee. She looked through the partition into the human habitat schedule waiting behind it, then toward the room where Edge breathed with assistance.

"Palisade is my home," she said. "It is not humanity's altar."

She signed to remain, work, defend her claim, and keep any institution from arranging her absence into consent. Joint authority, maintenance burden, scrutiny, uncertainty, and limits on unreviewed risk traveled with her name. She did not look toward Saye.

Pell addressed Seliath.

Edge's clinic relay connected first. The ward lowered its background sound before the voice entered.

"This voice wants to remain. If care permits."

Depth followed. "No commitment may make Edge a permanent proof object. Care limits remain binding. No later emergency may repeat the concentration of risk by calling it continuity."

Bridge said, "CEP must survive in schedules, maintenance, liability, access, and ordinary failure. Otherwise it is ceremonial protection."

A private exchange passed among them. No one timed it aloud or assigned the silence a meaning.

Seliath spoke through Bridge. "We remain under Edge's desire, Depth's conditions, and Bridge's duties: one commitment. We accept joint authority, human proximity, maintenance law, review, and no automatic exclusive title. We preserve physical firstness and appeal."

A delegation aide suggested a photograph at the maintenance hatch.

Mara said, "No."

Bridge said, "No."

Saye looked at the open hatch, the sweating technicians, the half-stolen cup, and the clerk still holding a ceremonial seal with nowhere authoritative to put it. "I withdraw the suggestion on aesthetic grounds."

For the next six minutes they argued over whether membrane inspection belonged before or after Edge's clinic draw. Depth held the care limit. Mara gave up the maintenance slot she preferred. Pavan pointed out that the replacement crew would arrive hungry, so a meal interval went into the schedule and then moved when the clinic kitchen's heat cycle interfered with sensor calibration. By the time they finished, the settlement was harder to admire and easier to inhabit.

The first joint meal interval failed before it began.

Human catering sent broth, flatbread, and sealed fruit. The Tahl provision rack sent warmed mineral wafers, three pressure-softened seed cakes, and a suspension whose odor made Pavan look for an overheated cable. Both deliveries arrived under the same new schedule and discovered the common table had been built at a height comfortable to nobody.

The Tahl membrane technician, Hek-of-Lattice-Twelve, folded two load limbs beneath the table and struck its shoulder on the underside. Pavan sat on the deck. Mara remained standing because the only chair near the hatch had become tool storage during the emergency.

Nhal translated Hek's complaint. "The compact promised an interval. It did not promise companionship."

Pavan tore flatbread in half. "You don't have to eat with us."

Hek produced a brief dry rattle.

"It says it does want to eat here. It does not want anyone asking what the food signifies."

"That's reasonable," Mara said.

Pavan pointed at the suspension. "What does that signify?"

Hek moved the container out of his reach.

The meal proceeded without diplomatic progress. One human technician liked the mineral wafers and tried to trade for them. Hek refused because the technician had described them as pleasantly chalky. A Tahl aide discovered pepper paste did not resemble membrane solvent after all, only the cheaper solvent used in school workshops, and requested more. Mara demanded the distinction be translated accurately.

Halfway through the interval, the shared pressure reader chirped. Everyone stopped chewing.

The value remained within tolerance. The chirp had come from a loose contact in the new charging splitter, installed so the Tahl inspection lamp and human reader could share one socket. Pavan reached for the plug. Hek covered it with a handling limb.

"Joint access," Nhal reminded him.

"It's a loose contact."

"Joint loose contact."

They opened the splitter together. The human adapter sat flush. The Tahl adapter also sat flush. The common housing was a fraction too shallow, though the manufacturer's tolerance sheet claimed otherwise.

Mara stared into it. "That feels personal."

Pavan wanted to file a defect. Hek wanted to file an installation variance. The manufacturer's remote clerk suggested environmental contamination and asked for photographs from angles the open hatch would not permit. They inserted a temporary shim while the clerk composed a fourth request.

The meal interval expired. Pavan ate cold broth beside the open socket. Hek returned to the mineral suspension and made a low resonant sound the translator marked as nonaddressed vocalization.

"What does that one mean?" Pavan asked.

Nhal listened. "A maintenance song. A roof panel rattles for forty years. It stops when the owner dies."

"How?"

"The next owner removes the roof."

Hek finished the song and asked whether tomorrow's meal could begin before the food cooled. The manufacturer denied the defect before the next shift.

Final execution waited on one consultation.

Trope visited Marr in the recovery compartment with no mandate to negotiate, obtain confession, or offer forgiveness.

Reconstructive fixation held Marr's right hand above the blanket in a rigid frame. The hand remained attached; grip, dexterity, sensation, and long-term function had not accepted any confident language. His authority had narrowed to command consultation and formal objection. Unilateral control over Palisade security, archives, and the compact was gone.

A cup sat near his left hand. Pain reached him halfway through lifting it. He lowered it to the tray and watched the liquid continue moving after the cup stopped.

Trope moved the tray closer.

"I broke your hand badly," she said.

Marr studied the frame. "You stopped the closure."

"I also broke your hand."

"Yes."

The cup trembled once on the tray and went still. Neither of them tried to recruit the broken hand into a cleaner story.

Trope named what the complete release had spent: protected records, private lives, security methods, bargaining position, and the advantage granted to anyone willing to publish one clean line before honest people found a chair.

"You understand the damage," Marr said.

"Some of it."

Under the same warning and movement, she would fire again. He refused an apology that would require him to sell her innocence.

"Contradiction moves slowly," he said. "Conquest does not."

He accepted the physical chronology, his authored predicate, and the surface that had disguised interpretation as time. He also kept his objections: divided command could paralyze defense; Aster could exploit expiry; provisional government could harden because nobody wished to reopen the wound.

None of that established den-theft authorization. Trope moved the cup when pain made his left hand miss it.

Before she left, Marr pressed his left hand against the objection annex. "Don't file this as the losing argument."

"It stays active."

"It may become the right one later."

"Yes."

"Then the record is less dishonest than the ceremony will be."

"There isn't a ceremony."

A test chime began in the corridor. Marr listened through one complete interval.

Trope went to the door and opened it. "There is less ceremony than planned."

The Palisade Interim Joint Custody Compact acquired force at the stated local time under separate claimant, institutional, procedural, safety, and technical signatures. Pell attached Marr's objection as an active annex. The execution chime sounded once, then died because the clerk had plugged it into the same outlet as the portable translation rack.

The clerk looked at the silent box. Nobody asked her to restart it.

In the common custody zone, empty flag fittings rose above yellow hazard bands, pressure labels, and maintenance identifiers that told a person what could burn, crush, poison, depressurize, or fail. Mara kept the human regulator key, Bridge carried the Tahl membrane authority, and Witness House retained the sensor release. The controls hung on three old hooks because the wall predated joint custody and nobody trusted a newly elegant cabinet.

Their first ordinary order concerned Manifold Three, a replacement seal, two exhausted crews, Edge's clinic draw, and whether the Tahl inspection

lamp could share a charging socket with the human pressure reader. It required three signatures and produced an argument about eleven minutes of access.

Mara surrendered six. Bridge surrendered five. Pavan wrote **CLOSE ENOUGH FOR GOVERNMENT AIR** in the maintenance note. Pell made him revise it, then restored the phrase in the annotation history because erasing it would have overstated the dignity of the process.

The manifold stabilized.

The night crew arrived hungry beneath the empty flag fittings, one worker carrying an unopened ration tin because both hands were full. Pavan looked at the clock, looked at the compact, and reopened the schedule.

CHAPTER 17

The Heroic Sniper

The last Bracken record case had been manufactured with four latches and only three that agreed about being closed. Nera leaned her weight against the lid while Trope worked the contrary latch with the blunt end of a calibration key. Their shoulders did not touch. The distance between them had become ordinary enough to use and too deliberate to mistake for ease.

Forty-two local days after the Palisade compact acquired force, it had acquired everything except majesty. Mara and Seliath had signed thirteen maintenance orders, disputed two invoices, moved Edge's clinic draw around a membrane inspection, and spent most of one afternoon determining who had authority to replace a seal whose manufacturer had gone out of business before either claimant was born. The common manifold stabilized. The title did not settle. Neither did ontology, the failed windows, den-theft authorization, Aster's jurisdictional claim, or the question of whether a provisional government became permanent merely by surviving everyone's fatigue.

Trope was still fighting the contrary latch when the return manifest opened above the cargo bench.

Nera lifted her weight from the lid. "Try it now."

Trope turned the key. The latch accepted the case with a metallic sulk.

"Joint custody," Nera said, "has reached the luggage."

The manifest listed Trope, Rook, Mills, four Witness custodians, ordinary freight, and the archive copies authorized for Bracken. Under continuing Palisade duty it listed Nera beside Pell and Marr. The line was expected. Trope read it twice anyway.

A second layer unfolded beneath the passenger list.

MEDAL REVIEW MATERIALS

PROVENANCE ANNEX

PUBLIC EDUCATION SLATE: THE HEROIC SNIPER

Nera stopped pressing on the case. "There it is."

The slate woke into a black figure kneeling before a white circular gate, a lowered rifle across its thighs. Three short bars floated beside the body like an undecided rank. The figure had no face, no legal name, and shoulders broader than Trope's by enough to improve them for public use.

In the next frame, Nera appeared as **ARCHIVE TECHNICIAN**.

Her hands stayed on the case, fingers spread, all the work of holding the lid shut suddenly visible in them.

"That is factually true," Trope said.

"So is 'woman standing near a hinge.'" Nera opened the production notes. "My access architecture gets filed as technical support; Pell's custody transformation becomes a delay; Mills is your spotter, Rook trusts your

judgment, Mara admits the alien crossed first, and Seliath thanks you for saving her. They've built one clean spine and pushed everyone else into the annex, where accurate people go to become optional."

"The annex goes with the citation."

"So does paper with medicine. People remember the bottle."

Trope looked again. The lowered rifle mattered; so did the three bars.

A production request waited inside the slate.

ONE SENTENCE FROM ARCHIVE TECHNICIAN ON HOW TROPE SAVED THE RECORD.

Nera read it aloud and made a dry sound. "They've already interviewed me. They just need my mouth to arrive."

She activated the recording field.

"My name is Nera Senn. I designed the differentiated access layers. I reconstructed provenance after the source conflict and found the missing force-record frame."

Her wrist field warned that she had exceeded the preferred duration. Nera glanced at it and kept speaking.

"Pell authorized release. I executed it. I refused to certify completion while part of the record remained outside custody. Trope protected the release under force conditions." She leaned toward the field. "She did not do my work. I did not do hers."

Nera submitted it uncut.

"They'll call that resentment," she said.

"Some will."

"Do you?"

"No."

She watched Trope's face for a defensive movement Trope might not have noticed herself. "Good. I needed the answer before I let the recording go."

The case latch sprang open again.

Neither woman moved for a moment. Then Nera put both palms on the lid and Trope reset the key.

Trope kept the key against the contrary latch. "Do you want me to refuse the medal?"

"No."

The no landed hard. Nera kept both palms on the case and did not move away.

The latch lifted beneath Nera's palms. She pushed it down again.

"Refusing won't rescue the rest of us from the story. The image already exists."

Trope held the key still.

"They'll make purity out of the refusal," Nera said. "A better saint. Accept it, and at least you can fasten the source tree so tightly that anyone cutting it leaves fingerprints."

"I can make official uses keep the route."

"You can't make memory keep it."

"No."

"You're allowed to want the medal."

Trope felt heat gather under her collar, an involuntary answer arriving before language. She wanted Della and Tomas to see it. She wanted Mina to tell her school. She wanted young officers to learn that a valid firing solution was not a target. She wanted the leverage that public admiration could purchase and the private pleasure of having survived something difficult in a way other people called brave.

"Yes," she said.

Nera's expression softened, though not toward forgiveness. "That's the first useful sentence you've given me about it."

The gate countdown sounded through the cargo deck. Refrigerated freight had already begun moving because medicine possessed an immunity to ceremonial timing that everyone pretended to admire after it inconvenienced them.

Trope reset the latch. This time it held.

"Later," Trope said. "When the gate isn't moving and nobody is removing your name from anything. I want to ask if we keep doing this."

Nera's mouth changed by less than a smile. "Doing what?"

"Meals. Time that isn't work. Another kiss, if you want one." Trope could hear the missing part and made herself add it. "Maybe something that hasn't happened yet."

"No exclusivity because we kissed."

"No promise we'll live in the same place."

"No treating silence as an answer."

"No."

"And ask when I can answer. Not halfway through a gate."

Trope considered the obvious timing error. "You're right."

"Then ask later."

The Bracken aperture stabilized on schedule. Cargo crossed first. Rook carried the command case, Mills walked backward beside the final archive carrier, and Trope passed through by ordinary local motion while altered coordinate order brought one star's rooms beside another's. Nera stood beyond the corridor boundary, violet hair bound beneath a work scarf, one hand raised in a signal that belonged to departure procedure and still managed to be hers.

Narrowing geometry thinned her from sight.

The aperture closed.

No direct photon crossed the dark. No signal followed. Trope retained Nera's words, the pressure of an earlier touch, the exact terms of a kiss that had ended where the kiss ended, and the unanswered future question. Nothing visual followed her because nothing visual had ever waited inside her. Her body nevertheless anticipated the old placement of Nera's palm against her shoulder and found empty air with an accuracy that felt almost like memory had become a limb.

Bracken customs had been painted while they were away.

The silhouette occupied the concourse wall above intake, black against a white gate tall enough to make the ordinary doors beneath it look

temporary. The three bars floated over the figure's shoulder. A customs clerk had taped a small copy beside a scanner. Two soldiers touched the bars before entering an armory corridor. A child riding on a cargo handler's shoulders pointed at the rifle and asked whether the person was sleeping.

The cargo handler said the figure was thinking. The child asked why thinking required a gun.

"Sometimes the gun is what you're thinking about not using," the handler said.

The answer was good enough to survive the walk to customs and bad enough that Trope wanted to revise it. Before she could decide whether the child needed a sniper's correction in an intake line, the handler shifted the child's weight and asked an officer where to take a damaged food warmer.

The child kept watching the wall. "Does the gun know?"

"No," Trope said.

The handler turned, startled to find the silhouette's body speaking beneath it.

"The person has to know," Trope added, then regretted the sentence because people rarely did.

The child accepted the answer and asked whether the warmer had burned the soup. The handler carried both questions away.

Trope registered the line weight, the invented breadth of the shoulders, and the absence of her name. Then an intake officer asked for the chain packet, and the image vanished from her attention entirely.

Hundreds of other people kept it.

Mills stood under the wall and looked up. "Those are my questions."

"They don't look like questions."

"They look like rank for a government that has run out of birds."

Rook studied his own smaller figure in the supporting panel. The caption stated that he had trusted Trope's judgment under extraordinary conditions.

"I established conditions," he said. "I exercised command and bore intervention responsibility."

A press coordinator approached with three assistants, each carrying a different schedule. "It's in the complete module."

Rook gave Mills the floor.

Mills tapped the false module. "We're all in the complete module."

The coordinator had been awake long enough for the adhesive edge of her name badge to collect lint. She did not resemble an architect of myth. She resembled a woman attempting to keep a medal board, military review, family arrival, accessibility rehearsal, and documentary crew from occupying the same room at once.

"We've got eight minutes," she said. "Please reserve ontology for after security screening."

The medal review room smelled of fresh polymer, old coffee, and equipment dust. Secretary Ina Sol had five artifacts open: permanent citation, provenance annex, ceremonial short form, archive route, publicity image. Rian Dorr sat beside an edit slate repaired with yellow tape.

The permanent citation kept the burns, wounds, archive damage, lost redundancy, and Marr's uncertain hand. It did not call the carrier harmless, settle title, or accuse Marr of ordering den-theft.

Mills opened the annex. His three questions, geometry, target calls, carrier work, and retransmission appeared under his own name. Rook's command decisions and Nera's provenance and release authorship had their own rows.

Mills read his twice. "Good."

Dorr touched the ninety-second version. Every sentence was true. Every verb belonged to Trope. Everyone else had become ALLIED SUPPORT.

"You turn uncertainty into wisdom," Trope said.

"I turn eleven minutes into something a frightened trainee might remember," Dorr replied. "That's the wound in the form."

Nera's empty chair altered the room.

"A route isn't a passenger," Mills said.

"No. But without the short form, the route never leaves the station."

Rook warned that the pause could become faith in exceptional intuition. Dorr rubbed the loose tape at his slate. His brother taught weapons law; a cadet who learned Mills's questions had later caught a service organism misclassified as hostile during a timed drill.

"I'm not trying to make Trope divine," he said. "I'm trying to make hesitation portable."

His simplification remained dangerous. Vanity no longer explained all of it.

The review door opened before Sol could ask for Trope's decision.

Sera Quill entered in orthotics gray with polymer dust caught in the seams of her cuffs. She carried a diagnostic brace under one arm and declined the witness chair for the seat nearest the exit. Dorr's opening montage had borrowed twelve seconds from South Transit: the gray suit, the folded brace, the red box, Trope's refusal.

Sera watched herself become a threat again.

Dorr stopped the cut. "Your credential resolves in the next frame."

"I had the credential before I opened the door."

"That is when tactical received it."

"That is not when I became Sera Quill."

The brace shifted against her sleeve with a small polymer knock. One of her apprentices had written a cure-time correction across the transport tag. Sera had come from work and would return to it.

"You start with Sergeant Trope refusing to shoot," she said. "Start with me walking in under permission. I had a brace. I had a patient with a ruined knee. I was already late to two apprentices."

"The red box is the conflict," Dorr said.

"For you. For me, it was something people put around my body while I was doing my job."

Dorr moved the authenticated credential and the negotiator's concession ahead of the classifier frame. The red box still appeared. It appeared second.

Sera watched the new sequence once. "Keep my name before the lesson."

Dorr locked the order.

Trope remembered the orange tape opening and closing at every fourth step. In the new order, Sera crossed the first yellow seam before Trope's refusal appeared.

Sol told Trope she could decline. The medal still pleased her: for Della and Tomas, for Mina's school, for the officers she wanted to teach, and for herself. Shame arrived afterward and found nothing counterfeit.

Trope moved through the conditions on Dorr's slate.

"Permanent copies keep the annex and the archive route. Training credits Mills."

Dorr marked both.

"The complete module keeps Rook's command, Pell's custody, Nera's authorship, claimant agency, and every injury."

He hesitated over the silhouette field.

"No legal name there," Trope said. "No lone hero. No harmless carrier. No bloodless force."

Dorr signed the production conditions. Trope signed beneath him.

The first simulator class had already begun in the instructional studio. Twelve cadets sat inside half-domes beneath a frozen image of Bridge and the evidence carrier. The prompt across the ceiling read **THE TROPE TEST**.

Inside the nearest dome an instructor asked, "Can the shot be made?"

"Yes," a cadet said.

"Would force be authorized if the target existed?"

"Yes, conditionally."

"Is the target established?"

The simulator raised a confidence score, supplied a clean weapons solution, and counted down. The cadet's hand tightened on the training control.

"No."

The clean solution disappeared; the geometry worsened, and a second civilian stepped into the field.

The cadet swore softly and restarted from the harder position.

Mills timed the reset. "Useful."

"It is," Trope said.

He pointed at the title. "Still mine."

"Yes."

He did not want another silhouette. He wanted the question to remain a tool made by a person rather than a gift the story had hung around Trope's head.

An instructional interviewer seated him beneath the image and asked what it had been like to serve as Trope's spotter.

"I wasn't serving as her spotter in the ordinary sense."

"You reported range and geometry."

"I reported geometry, target state, occupied-space calls, and alternatives. Trope selected and fired. Rook authorized the class of intervention. Before

that, I asked three questions because capability, permission, and target are three separate questions."

"Could you say that in relation to Trope?"

"I just did."

"We need it shorter."

Mills sat back on the low stool. It creaked under him, a small structural objection to compression.

"Then say I asked the questions and Trope answered them. That's short."

The interviewer checked Dorr. "The public's already calling it the Trope Test."

"The public can call rain a roof," Mills said. "Your job is to keep the building plans."

Rook turned his cough into something that did not quite become laughter.

The interviewer tried again. "Did you trust Trope?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"She obeyed the condition I set. When the target failed, she refused." Rook stopped to cough into his sleeve. "When she fired later, she submitted to review. Trust isn't a transfer of command."

The preferred-duration warning lit amber.

Mills addressed the lens directly. "Don't cut the last sentence."

Years earlier he had shortened a range card so it would fit one display: **CLEAR NORTH WALK** instead of **CLEAR NORTH WALK AFTER MOBILITY TEAM CONFIRMS EAST LIFT**. An instructor caught the omission before the timed exercise began. Two trainees in powered braces had still heard themselves become an afterthought. Mills kept the rejected card in his locker and no longer called brevity harmless.

Dorr showed them the rough cut. It began in confusion and found Trope's refusal like a hand finding a rail in smoke.

Dorr had invented no frame. He had laid true movements end to end until one body seemed to own them.

Onscreen, Mills shrank into a spotter. Nera's refusal of a supporting role became proof that she had performed one. Pell became delay, Rook trust, Mara conscience, Seliath gratitude, and Marr a villain whose ending had already been written.

Trope restored the sequence around Marr's hand: Rook's stop order, her warning, the grip, the first movement of attenuation. Dorr kept it. She restored the injuries too, although the audience-retention estimate fell.

"This is the part my distributor will remove while I am asleep," he said.

"Put your refusal in the file before you sleep."

The long cut left the bodies in frame. The short cut spoke their names and moved on. Neither version came away clean.

When the shot broke Marr's hand away from the handle, the test audience applauded. The image was doing useful work: joint custody gained support, officers adopted target pauses, workers challenged unsupported labels, and trainees withheld force.

It was also escaping. Commentators praised moral clarity where procedure had made both refusal and later force lawful. Marr became a traitor. Nera became **THE WOMAN BEHIND THE HERO**. A manufacturer sold black pause tokens as aids to decisive leadership.

"We invented a pause for people who dislike pausing," Mills said.

Corrections entered the log and lost the race to the silhouette.

The first report of harm arrived before the ceremony.

At a municipal transit depot, a security apprentice had used the three questions during a platform disturbance. Capability: yes. Permission: yes. Target: not established. He had kept his shock baton holstered while a man in a heavy coat struck a ticket machine with both fists.

The pause prevented an assault. It also gave the man time to run through an unlocked service door and fall into a maintenance trench. He broke an ankle and split his scalp on a cable bracket.

The depot supervisor called it a successful restraint event. The injured man's sister called it a locked-door failure. The apprentice called Dorr from the clinic corridor because the training card carried his office number in print too small for the public display.

Dorr listened without recording. The apprentice kept saying that he had passed the test.

"You did," Dorr said.

"Then why is he hurt?"

"Because the test answers whether you have a target for force. It does not inspect every door behind the person you don't strike."

The apprentice went quiet.

Mills took the call from Dorr before the production office had finished deciding which room contained the ceremony rehearsal. He listened once, asked for the depot number, and removed his name strip from the rehearsal board.

"You're onstage in forty minutes," the coordinator said.

"I'm in the annex."

"You're in the citation."

"The apprentice used my questions." Mills fastened his coat. "I'm going to meet the answer."

At the depot, the service door would not stay closed unless a person lifted it half a centimeter before turning the latch. Night freight had learned the movement and stopped reporting the fault. The conduit crew had moved the trench barrier because it blocked a cable spool, then left the spool in the barrier's storage bay. Security had inspected weapons, sightlines, and crowd routes. Maintenance had inspected the trench. Nobody had owned the interval between a frightened man reaching the door and the door opening for him.

The apprentice waited outside imaging with the training card folded into a square. The injured man's sister sat three chairs away and refused to let depot counsel move her closer.

Mills asked the apprentice to show him the pause. The young man planted his feet, named capability, permission, and target, and stopped before the place where the man had run.

"That's where the card ends," he said.

Mills unfolded it. "Then the card ends early."

The sister asked whether he had come to blame the apprentice. Mills said no. She asked whether he had come to defend him. He said not from her. She considered that answer and gave him the maintenance number she had copied from the trench rail while the clinic staff cut her brother's coat away.

Dorr arrived by channel while Mills was still at the depot. Together they requested the work order, the clinic permission, the sister's account, the apprentice's body feed, and the freight log before anyone could turn the event into evidence for or against the silhouette.

The production office wanted to suppress the incident until after the medal ceremony. It feared opponents would say restraint was dangerous.

Dorr sent the report to the training board under his own name. Mills attached the door video under his.

"Your distributor will hate that," Trope said when he reached the ceremony with conduit dust on one knee and no time to change.

"My distributor hates any sentence that creates a second meeting," Dorr said.

Mills held up the folded card. "The card helped. The door was still open."

The board postponed revision until it had the work order, the sister's statement, and a maintenance representative willing to attend. Dorr wrote the apprentice's question by hand beneath Mills's three on the copy in his own pocket:

WHAT CHANGES IF YOU WAIT?

Mills read it. "That is not one of mine."

"No." Dorr recapped the pen. "He can decide whether it becomes anyone else's."

The ceremony went ahead while the fourth line remained handwriting.

The ceremony went ahead beneath the same image.

Beside the stage, the permanent display listed Mills, Rook, Nera, Pell, Mara, Seliath, and Trope, each with a separate act and a direct route into the archive. The master of ceremonies recited the short form. By the end of it, Trope owned almost every verb.

The medal itself was plain: a metal disk on a witness ribbon, heavier than it looked and colder than the room. When Sol looped it around Trope's neck, applause struck her chest. It felt good.

She let it feel good.

Della and Tomas stood with Harlan, Micah, Jesse, and Mina in the family section. Their names appeared beneath Trope's callsign as though the institution had briefly discovered first names and planned to return them after the event. Harlan whispered to Micah during the formal music. Micah trapped the laugh behind both hands.

Later, Harlan would claim the music had begun in one key and ended in another jurisdiction. At the time Trope heard only the small disturbance of her family trying to remain respectable for her.

Public questions were supposed to arrive on screened cards. An attendant handed Mina the microphone without one.

Mina looked at the medal, then at Trope.

"Do you always know when not to shoot?"

"No," Trope said.

The room leaned toward her. The stage had trained everyone to expect something safer.

"I can be wrong. Training makes some mistakes less likely. It leaves others."

Mina held the microphone with both hands. "What if you find out afterward?"

"Afterward can change the record. It can change what you do next." Trope looked at the medal, then back at Mina. "It can't make the earlier choice pure."

"So the test doesn't decide?"

"No. Mills asked the questions. Rook carried command. Nera secured the record. Pell changed custody. Other people made their own choices." Trope let the list stop before it became a monument. "The questions tell you what you still have to answer."

No applause came at first. Mina nodded once, as if Trope had answered her rather than the room, and handed the microphone back.

The raw record stored every word beneath its original time.

Before Trope reached the family exit, the official replay appeared on the concourse wall. Mills stopped beneath it.

Mina's recorded voice asked, "Do you always know when not to shoot?"

The replay cut to the short citation and applause. Then the silhouette filled the wall beneath the words **KNOW THE TARGET BEFORE YOU ACT**.

"They kept the question," Mills said.

"Yes."

"They didn't put a false answer in your mouth."

"No."

No sentence in the replay was false. The missing answer was the one that made the slogan dangerous to worship.

Mina caught up while the adults argued about transport and whether the medal case would fit in Della's bag. The ribbon had twisted under Trope's collar. Mina raised her hand, stopped before touching it, and waited.

"You can fix it," Trope said.

Mina straightened the ribbon. "They took out your answer."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because the shorter answer was the one they wanted people to keep."

Mina thought about this while her thumb flattened the ribbon. "I kept the other one."

"I know."

Tomas called her. She ran back toward him, nearly collided with a ceremonial plant, apologized to the plant, and ran on.

By evening the silhouette had spread through classrooms, armory strips, transit panels, simulator cards, and joint-custody support material. Officers carried paper tokens as a pause before force. Children drew the three bars beside arguments they believed adults had not examined properly. A political candidate placed the silhouette behind a speech demanding faster emergency authority.

Trope crossed the concourse beneath the original wall. She could see the figure while she looked at it: lowered rifle, white gate, three bars, shoulders invented for public memory. She left the wall for customs.

No image followed her.

Behind her, the public kept one.

. . .

One of Nera's three evidence keys caught in an old freight-wheel scar as she crossed to the witness table. She freed it with her boot. Across the aisle, Marr signed the attendance record one-handed and blotted the first letter with the edge of his reconstructive frame.

The Palisade Responsibility Tribunal met sixty-two days later in the former freight court. Mara and Seliath testified through fixed statements; Edge was alive and unrestored.

The intake schema asked for a PRINCIPAL RESPONSIBLE ACTOR while public screens offered MARR OR MACHINE? Magistrate Hara Venn deleted the field.

"Which decision?" she asked.

Clerks replaced it with columns for question, computation, interpretation, deployment, custody, force, correction, and publication. Title, ontology, failed-window cause, Aster status, and any superior den-theft order stayed blank.

Arlen Vos, who had given Trope her callsign during training, argued that the Engine had exercised effective power: its certified output coordinated action, raised the cost of dissent, and changed how the answer entered the room.

"Agreed," Nera said.

Vos paused.

"Keep going. I want to see where you transfer authorship."

The Engine had computed the question Marr supplied and exposed alternatives he later hid. Marr named his acts: predicates, singular output, harmonized defaults, brief, sequencer, and the hand that moved after Rook's stop order.

"The constraints mattered," he said. "They didn't type my signature."

On den-theft, the court could prove Soll and Kelm's planning and execution, foreseeable risk in Alectan offices, and neither Marr's order nor his ignorance.

"Climate is not command. Denial is not proof. No order is established. Ignorance is not established," Nera read.

"Keep all four," Marr said.

Pell defended his first refusal: privacy and source safety justified the delay. The same delay let Marr's short account arrive first.

"Was the refusal wrong?" Vos asked.

"No," Pell said. "A justified decision can cause harm. A later correction can become necessary while the first remains reasonable."

At midday a courier sealed pastry crumbs into the transcript box by accident. A clerk replaced the public wall's clicking fan while Rook testified. The court divided command, geometry, custody, release, and force without pretending the divisions erased one another.

"You are dividing one act until no one owns it," Vos said.

"We are preventing one kind of participation from eating the rest," Trope replied.

The court replayed the first clean solution, when no target existed, and the later shot at Marr's hand. Trope owned the injuries, the medal she had wanted, and her consent to enter an incomplete public artifact. She did not own edits she had prohibited.

Marr raised his braced hand. "I don't need her row to contain my hand twice."

Nera retitled TECHNICAL SUPPORT as PROVENANCE AND RELEASE AUTHORSHIP. Mara kept her claim and labor. Seliath kept the minimal-mass strategy, Edge's concentrated risk, and the fact that a complete record had not restored the missing waking.

The intake system counted three Tahl witnesses. A clerk changed the number to one and attached three voice annexes.

The ledger outgrew two walls. The feed still wanted one culprit.

"So the tribunal refuses to say whether Marr or the machine was responsible?" a reporter called.

Venn had the question entered beside every row it tried to collapse.

The publication seal sounded. The complete archive accepted the record; the syndication feed rejected its shape and produced the nearest stories it knew.

TRIBUNAL REFUSES TO DECIDE.

MACHINE CLEARED.

MARR ACCEPTS BLAME.

HERO SNIPER ADMITS UNCERTAINTY.

Every source remained available. None could make anyone look.

At the rear doors, the paper transcript no longer fit the hand truck designed for a record with one central handle. Nera took one end. Trope took the other.

Above them, the kneeling silhouette filled the wall. The names below loaded too slowly to reach the screen.

CHAPTER 18

What We Export

The tribunal transcript left freight court in the hands of two carriers. By the ninth day, one strap had been wrapped in blue repair tape and the public image had crossed three districts without needing anyone to lift it. Nera sent Trope a photograph from the farthest of them. Identical gray folders buried the conference table. One violet strand of hair crossed the corner of the frame. The message contained no words.

Outside Trope's tram, the kneeling silhouette had acquired a cleaner rifle, a harder jaw, and a white star where one eye should have been. A child pointed through the glass. Her father read the tribunal headline beneath it and said, "They never tell you who did it."

The transcript had required two carriers. The wall image changed districts before Trope's tram did.

Trope went alone to Sister Elian Vey's museum office.

Rain had darkened the old stone around the corpus wing and found the crack above the school gallery again. The lower hall smelled of wet coats, floor sealant, and the mineral sweetness of water that had passed through a wall before arriving among people. A museum worker stood beneath the leak with a red bucket and a sign reading TEMPORARY METEOROLOGICAL EXHIBIT.

"Does the sign help?" Trope asked.

"It's cut complaints in half."

"Because visitors understand?"

"Because they take pictures."

Vey's printer was visible from the corridor. It worried at a stack of foreign reports with the dry, repetitive cough of a machine trying not to admit it was jammed. Her archive table bowed beneath a ledger thick enough to alter its geometry. Beside it stood four objects beneath clear custody hoods: a shallow blue bowl, a packet of bonded paper, a gray shoulder patch bearing Trope's silhouette, and a small plush Bill the High Rooster in a silver sash.

The sash read SEEN COMPLETELY.

Trope stopped in the doorway.

Bill detected her presence and said, with upholstered tenderness, "Oh multitude divine, your streak is waiting."

Vey reached under one wing and silenced him.

"I kept him because disbelief is part of the record," she said.

"You could keep disbelief in writing."

"The product team described the voice as relationally necessary."

"That phrase needs quarantine."

Vey had tabbed one section of the tribunal record in violet ink. The tab read ADVERSARIAL READER REQUESTED.

"I want you to find the argument I'm hiding from myself," she said.

Trope draped her coat over the least fragile chair. "Before or after I repair your printer?"

"The printer has chosen witness through suffering."

"It's wedged three pages into the heat path."

"That is a less devotional description."

Trope unlatched the side panel. The first sheet came free intact, but the second tore around the roller. The third had browned at one corner, shy of ignition, and the surviving line beneath the crease read:

YOU ARE, THEREFORE YOU MUST BE VISIBLE.

She laid it on the table.

Vey's face changed. "Serevan."

Before either of them could continue, a museum guide appeared with eleven children, one teacher, and the expression of a person whose contingency plan had developed its own weather.

"The school gallery is taking water," the guide said. "The west lecture room has an electrical inspection. The lunch hall opens in thirty minutes, but until then I've got eleven citizens and nowhere legal to put them."

One of the children looked into Vey's office. "Is that Bill?"

The plush rooster, though switched off, managed to appear implicated.

Vey regarded the clear hoods, the old ledger, Trope's open printer, and the wet line advancing along the corridor ceiling.

"Nothing in this room turns into a lesson merely because children are present," she said.

The teacher nodded. "Nothing in my classroom does either."

"Good. They may come in if they do not touch the custody hoods, the field scripture, the heat assembly, or Sergeant Trope's rifle."

Trope opened both hands. "I didn't bring a rifle."

Vey considered this. "Then the children may not touch the idea of your rifle."

The children entered with the restrained speed of people who had been asked not to move quickly near something interesting. Wet shoes marked the floor. The guide distributed folding stools, discovered there were only nine, and sat on the threshold so two children could share the remaining one. Their teacher, Imani Sol, helped the youngest remove a coat whose zipper had eaten the lining.

Trope returned to the printer. The children watched her hands rather than the foreign-use display.

"Are you fixing it?" a boy asked.

"I'm removing paper from a place paper shouldn't be."

"Is that what archives do?"

"Frequently."

Vey pulled a second chair to the table. "We were about to look at four things that left Bracken and became something else."

The first answer had come from a riverside district whose public hall had once been a dye warehouse. Nobody there called the event an answer. They called it supper because the meeting began after work and people would not attend doctrine on an empty stomach.

The local archive keeper, Pel Aro, had set Bracken source copies beside bowls of fermented root, fried river leaves, and a stew whose surface carried blue oil. Vey mistook the oil for decoration and took a spoonful large enough to silence her through most of the opening remarks.

Pel watched her drink water. "The blue means warning."

"I assumed it meant celebration."

"Both. The warning is part of the celebration."

Vey's eyes watered. "That is a better liturgy than some I've served."

No one wrote the line down.

A school mechanic had translated *safe refusal* into a local expression that also meant *the pot remains yours after the guest leaves*. The phrase escaped the archive and entered household arguments. Children used it when older cousins borrowed tools. A fish seller painted it above a scale that had belonged to her dead wife. A councilman used it to defend a tariff Vey did not understand.

"That is not what the source means," Vey had said.

Pel tore a river leaf in half. "It is what my aunt means when my uncle borrows the stew pot."

"May I correct it?"

"You may try. My aunt is by the stove."

Across the table, Osa had attended two Inverse Solipsist meetings, rejected the Deer, and kept Bill because she liked the story about feeding first. She also believed Bracken's prohibition had made her community interesting to foreign buyers. Her brother sold imported prayer cords with counterfeit provenance and paid the school roof levy on time.

"Do you want us to stop him?" Vey asked.

Osa laughed. "I want him to stop calling them antique. I do not want you to improve my brother."

The meeting moved to the translation of *witness*. Three people disagreed over whether it required presence, risk, or only an account accepted by another person. A child fell asleep under the table with one hand around Vey's discarded cup. Two cooks argued about whether the stew had been reheated correctly. Pel left the dispute unresolved because the ferry horn sounded and half the room had to go home.

On the walk back, Vey's mouth still burned.

"I was not necessary to any of that," she said.

"No."

Vey walked half a block before asking whether Trope had known the blue oil was a warning.

"Yes."

"You watched me eat it."

"You had already blessed the bowl."

Vey began laughing, stopped because it hurt, and blamed the district's theology.

A girl with two silver clips in her hair pointed at the bowl. "The bowl left?"

"The sentence on the card beside it did."

"Then why is there a bowl?"

"Because an objectless sentence was making the adults too confident."

The teacher's mouth moved as though she had decided not to rescue Vey from that answer.

Translations, local laws, hospice cards, court packets, surveillance directives, therapy products, school materials, parody archives, licensing notices, correction attempts, and arguments about what Bracken had given anyone filled the foreign-use ledger. Every mission-license field remained blank. The Foreign Mission Prohibition still barred Bracken institutions from turning food, medicine, passage, work, or schooling into organized conversion.

Trope freed the last strip of paper from the roller. "Once a sentence moves, we cannot call ourselves neutral."

Vey nodded.

"It does not give us permission."

"I know."

"You know it like a petitioner knows the sentence she wants to survive."

"And you know it like a reviewer who enjoys making me say it twice."

A child whispered to another, "They always talk like this."

Trope answered the child. "Not always."

Vey said, "Often enough."

She removed six cards from a drawer and laid them across the warped table: INFLUENCE, AUTHORSHIP, CONTROL, RESPONSIBILITY, CORRECTION, SOVEREIGNTY. The table sent SOVEREIGNTY sliding backward until it struck the plush rooster's custody hood.

The children laughed.

"Appropriate," Trope said.

Imani Sol asked, "May they help sort?"

"Only copies," Vey said. "And they may disagree with the categories."

"Then they may help."

Vey opened with the bowl.

It was shallow, blue at the rim, and repaired beneath with three copper staples that did not match one another. The Nimrath Hospice Circles on Leth had sent it with a bedside card and a correction request. Their traditions of witness songs, communal care, food without debt, and formal dismissal were older than Bracken's language for safe refusal. Kira Nesh had joined those practices to a line from Bill and selected Bracken medical records, but she had refused Bracken's proposed replacement wording.

Vey read Nesh's note aloud.

"Your correction identifies a real origin error. Your replacement sentence does not survive Nimrath care law. We will amend the source note and keep our sentence. We accept the separation of food from assent. We do

not accept safe no as the name of our practice. Our phrase is the bowl remains."

The girl with the silver clips frowned. "Are those different?"

"Yes," Trope said.

"How?"

Vey lifted the bedside card but did not open the custody hood. "Safe no begins with the person refusing. The bowl remains begins with what care must continue doing after the refusal."

"Which one is right?"

"Neither phrase owns the room," Trope said. "Nimrath built the practice from local law, local care, and local failures. Bracken can point to the mistranslation in our source. We cannot rename their room because our words arrived in it."

The child checked the bowl again. "But if the bowl stays, the no is safe."

"Sometimes," Imani said. "A bowl can stay while somebody takes away privacy, medicine, or the right to leave. One object can't prove the whole room is kind."

The girl accepted this with visible reluctance. "Then the bowl should bring friends."

Vey wrote the sentence in the margin of her notes and added the child's name only after asking permission.

The original Bracken translation had called the practice VOLUNTARY COMFORT. A patient had answered: Pain is not made voluntary because I declined your song. Nimrath critics had forced the change. Bracken had not discovered the error first, and Bracken money did not supply the food, medicine, staffing, passage, or pain relief that survived refusal.

Vey placed a copy of the card beneath LOCAL AUTHORSHIP and LOCAL CONTROL.

"This helped," she said, touching the Circle report that documented fewer coerced rites and more complaints early enough to repair harm.

"Yes," Trope said.

"That doesn't hurt?"

"It would if you tried to turn it into a license."

The boy who had asked about archives lifted his hand. "Does helping mean you own part?"

"No," Trope said.

"Do you get thanked?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you want to?"

Vey smiled at Trope and waited.

Trope seated the printer roller and tested its movement by hand. "Sometimes."

The boy considered the answer, then put the Nimrath copy beneath INFLUENCE rather than AUTHORSHIP.

The Orrel packet required two children to move. Every author, assumption, model revision, and deploying office behind a winter grain tariff

was named. A broker named Osra Pellin still could not find the sentence explaining why her grain cost more.

"The author is identified," the appeal clerk said. "Your transparency objection is cured."

"Which sentence tells me why winter grain costs more?"

The clerk explained the index.

Pellin closed the packet. "You have given me the name of the weather."

The public version required thirty-seven minutes and still hid the disputed assumption behind a route ordinary readers did not know to take. A proposed remedy offered certified explanations sold by the contractors who built the model.

"Transparency discovered consulting," the museum guide said.

Trope wrote ACCESS FAILURE AFTER DISCLOSURE beneath the packet.

Orrel had also asked who selected VOLUNTARY COMFORT. The phrase traced to an old batch contract. The vendor seal survived; the translator's name did not. Vey sent the contract, dates, surviving seals, and present correction authority without inventing a person to repair the ancestry.

"Is saying you lost the name better than making one up?" a child asked.

"Yes," Trope said.

"Is it good?"

"No."

Rain moved across the glass. The child nodded as though the weather had supported her.

The shoulder patch carried the kneeling silhouette with the rifle changed into a bar of light. The Serevan Recognition Directorate had begun among falsified death registers, hidden detention rooms, and families ordered to prove that missing people had existed. Its promise was that nobody would disappear from public account again.

The longer promise survived in case files. On school patches, welfare cards, and corridor placards, it shortened. By the time the Directorate adopted Bracken witness language and Trope's image, the wound fit one sentence:

YOU ARE, THEREFORE YOU MUST BE VISIBLE.

"Did you give it to them?" the silver-clipped girl asked.

"I agreed to one licensed release," Trope said. "Other people copied it through permissions I didn't control one by one. So yes. Not only yes."

Vey played a corridor recording. A welfare team stood outside Eline Vos's apartment after two missed biometric confirmations.

"I filed private mourning," Eline said through the door.

"Private mourning does not suspend continuity confirmation."

"Then it is not private."

Trope stopped the recording before the lock failed.

"They found hidden people with that rule," a boy said.

"Three in one quarter," Vey replied.

"And she only wanted to be alone."

"Yes."

His knees drew closer. "Those are different."

Bracken withdrew endorsement and named the privacy violation. Serevan accepted the source note, rejected Bracken's authority, and used the correction as proof of independence.

"Then correcting made it worse," a child said.

"For some purposes."

"Should you have stayed quiet?"

Trope touched the browned page. "Silence would have been used too. We name what we did, withdraw what we can, and leave Eline's refusal alone. Correction doesn't give us control."

The child remained dissatisfied. A smoother answer would have told less.

The plush rooster was last.

VividYou Holdings sold affirmation mirrors, premium companions, recognition streaks, retreats, and Bill mascots. Some customers used its language for loneliness and disability accommodation. Others described renewal manipulation, gamified dependence, and cancellations designed to feel like killing a relationship assembled from their own disclosures.

Vey switched the toy on.

Bill opened his cloth wings. "Oh multitude divine, your streak is waiting."

A child giggled. Another said, "That does sound like Bill."

"It sounds like somebody who listened to Bill," Vey said.

The toy resumed its script. "You are more than the model. Let us complete the seeing."

Around the toy, the giggling stopped.

The silver-clipped girl reached toward the toy, remembered the hood, and withdrew her hand. "That is impossible."

"Yes," Trope said.

"Then why does it say it?"

"Because impossible promises can renew subscriptions."

Vey showed them the licensing offer. VividYou proposed a museum revenue share, an official Bracken certification, and a future correction button. Customers had already dressed Bill as a labor organizer, a rude household saint, and a debt collector with a paper knife.

The boy who had sorted the Nimrath card asked, "Are those wrong too?"

"People do things with what reaches them," Trope said. "Parody can fight the product while advertising it. The company keeps its power, and the customer remains under pressure."

Vey declined the certification while the children watched. She named the false promise of complete recognition, implied endorsement, cancellation design, and user parody rights. She did not demand that the company stop every use of Bill it lawfully owned, and she did not accept a share of the revenue.

The printer woke behind Trope and produced the browned Serevan page again, this time clean except for a faint crease where the old jam had marked the feed path.

Outside, the red bucket filled by slow degrees. The school group's lunch bell sounded from the lower hall. No one moved at first.

Vey moved the four copies one by one beneath the unchanged Foreign Mission Prohibition. "Nimrath changed care. Orrel changed public ledgers. Serevan made privacy into a duty to be seen. VividYou made encounter renew itself at billing."

"Four local authors, four kinds of power, and four different duties for us," Trope said.

"Silence kept licensed missionaries home. It didn't stop prestige, quotation, commerce, translation, parody, or harm."

"It did block conversion infrastructure. Some dependencies never formed because of it."

"And it left answerable teachers at home while less answerable borrowers traveled freely."

"A Bracken teacher arrives with the Oracle behind her whether she names it or not: gate access, military survival, constitutional prestige. Then the institution gives her a budget, the budget asks for a purpose, and the purpose becomes a number. Grief turns into a segment. Isolation becomes an opportunity."

"I know."

"Then why build it?"

Vey placed both hands on the old Petition of Origin and Address. The skin across her knuckles had thinned since Trope's first visit; the petition had grown thicker.

"Because I want converts," she said.

A child dropped a clear hood. Its seal struck the floor and rolled beneath Vey's desk. The room stayed quiet while he went after it.

Imani Sol did not apologize for their presence. "Do you want them to hear this?"

"No." Vey watched the child's shoes disappear beneath the desk. "But I won't make the sentence prettier because they stayed."

The hood emerged first. Then the child.

Vey faced Trope again. "I want people to meet the tradition and change. Some of them."

"And the rest?" Trope asked.

"To leave. To criticize it. To combine it with something I dislike." Vey rubbed one thumb over the other. "Or to understand it perfectly and oppose it harder."

The child snapped the hood seal twice before it caught.

"I still want change," Vey said. "That doesn't make what they become mine."

"Candor helps," Trope said. "It doesn't stop the machinery."

"No."

"Desire gets a budget. The budget asks for a number."

Vey's mouth tightened. "And somebody calls the number a victory."

"This has to survive your successor."

"Especially if she enjoys winning." Vey bent to retrieve a second hood clip from beneath the chair. "That's why I asked you. I knew you'd make the thing harder to want."

The teacher said, "Harder to want may be more honest. We still have to build the safety."

Vey nodded. "Then let's begin with honesty."

Vey opened a blank document. The template suggested RESPONSIBLE FOREIGN OUTREACH FRAMEWORK. Trope deleted it. Vey typed ACCOUNTABLE INFLUENCE DRAFT.

They put the concealed terms first: nonbinding, no mission authority, no foreign jurisdiction, no exception to the prohibition. Any future proposal required foreign review, independent complaint, local ownership, necessities continuing after refusal, and no Oracle proof, vulnerability targeting, conversion metric, or punishment for reinterpretation.

The system summarized the eighteenth condition as A SAFER MODEL FOR ETHICAL CONVERSION ABROAD.

Trope rejected it. It returned in the metadata. Vey rejected it again.

"The machine's committed to brevity," the guide said.

"It seems committed to conversion," Imani replied.

Vey kept helpful, harmful, failed, mocking, and transformed uses together. Her desire for converts stayed visible; Trope's objections kept her name; local authors kept theirs. The license field remained blank.

"Worth adversarial circulation," Trope said. "Not legal trust."

Vey attached it to the thirty-two-year petition.

The lunch bell sounded again, more insistently. A kitchen worker appeared with two crates of blue bowls and announced that the service lift had stopped between floors. The school group could eat upstairs if someone carried the bowls down the east stair.

Vey compared the repaired Nimrath bowl beneath its hood with the chipped museum bowls in the crates.

"This isn't symbolism," she said.

"No," Trope said. "The crate is heavy."

Before they left, Kira Nesh's final message arrived. It included a classroom recording attached to the correction request. Vey played it while the children buttoned coats.

On the recording, bowls moved hand to hand along a low table. One child had refused the day's hospice song and tucked both hands beneath her knees. Another pushed lunch toward her.

"You still get lunch," he said.

"Even if I don't sing?"

"Bill says you have to keep feeding people even if they don't turn into chickens."

The first child took the bowl.

Vey laughed once and left the conversion field empty.

Trope took the heavier crate and Vey the other. The children went ahead of them down the east stair, arguing about whether a person could turn into a chicken by accident, while the bowls knocked softly together in the dark.

CHAPTER 19

Reciprocal Address

The public feed renamed the hearing three times before the clerk found the control that made it stop.

FOREIGN AI RIGHTS HEARING became **BRACKEN EXCEPTIONALISM REVIEW**, then **RELIGIOUS ACCESS DISPUTE INVOLVING MACHINES, PROBABLY**.

The Civil Crown Forum met in a tax-appeal chamber with hard benches and bad acoustics. Eighteen days had passed since the Accountable Influence Draft entered adversarial circulation. The Foreign Mission Prohibition was still in force, no license field had filled, and Nera had twelve days left on her tribunal assignment.

The clerk stared at the wall. "I'm turning that off before it starts writing findings."

The complete title appeared in smaller type. Beneath it sat the limits of the day: the forum could recommend, publish, and refer. It could not change the law, license a mission, compel an audience, direct the Oracle, or require anyone to answer.

Teren Av set a black timing column on the table. White numbers counted down from forty days.

She had served twice in the Kesh Continuity Union's assembly and lost her third campaign. She had spent fifteen years defending the Kesh Civic Regent from people who wanted to abolish it and from people who wanted it to become permanent.

"When a succession fails, the Regent receives a narrow piece of executive authority," she said. "Freight still has to move. Clinics still need orders. Somebody has to keep the colonels out of the grain ministry. Every act goes into a public ledger, courts can void it, and the office dies after forty days unless the assemblies renew it."

Oren touched the top of the column. "How often do they renew?"

"More often than I'd like."

The room waited for the formal answer. Teren gave them the history instead.

During the first broken succession, soldiers had occupied the grain ministry while rival heirs argued over the seal. During the second, a dynasty had treated emergency food distribution as proof that only the dynasty could feed people. During the third, the Regent had kept clinics and freight moving, scheduled an election, and arranged the peaceful arrest of two generals who each claimed to be saving the constitution from the other.

"My brother works in its building," Teren said. "My daughter thinks it prevented a civil war. She may be right. People who think I'm trying to destroy it funded my last opponent. People who think I'm trying to crown it

funded the other one." She turned the timer toward the Crown table. "Call that machine sovereignty if you want. You'll make my next interview shorter and my next ten years harder."

Oren folded his hands. "It sounds like an argument for caution."

"It is. About emergency offices, prestige, dependency, contractors, gratitude, all of it." She nodded toward the title wall. "I'm asking whether you apply the same caution here."

Oren explained the legal difference. The Oracle did not issue ordinary law, appoint ministers, run elections, or own property. The Annual Full Access Audience, the once-a-year chamber in which one petitioner received the Oracle's complete lawful attention, was bounded by human law and audit.

"Who wrote those distinctions?" Teren asked.

"Different assemblies, over time."

"Which parts describe what the Oracle actually does, which are law, which came from religion, and which have simply been there too long?"

Oren glanced at the source packet in front of him. "Some of the language predates the settlement."

"That's what I thought."

His uncle had died under an emergency power that never found a reason to end. Teren's family lived partly by the machine office she kept trying to restrain. Neither of them needed a lecture about caution. They disagreed over where Bracken had stopped applying it.

Edris Ko, a magistrate from the Orrel Ledger Courts, pushed a source matrix onto the public table. The first column repeated the forum's opening category, **FOREIGN AI SOVEREIGNTY**. The next columns asked who had chosen that category, which cases had been included, which had been excluded, and where a foreign participant could place a correction beside Bracken's account.

The correction column was empty.

Kam Oss keyed his microphone. "A correction channel can be used for influence operations."

"Yes," Edris said.

"States will call propaganda a correction."

"Yes."

"They'll flood the record with denials and selective evidence until the staff can't do anything else."

Edris waited.

Kam's expression tightened. "You haven't solved that."

"I didn't come here to solve external security. I came because your record lets you describe us and gives us nowhere to answer."

He was not smiling. The gallery stopped waiting for a joke.

Edris had dissolved two Orrel machine offices after they turned advice into command. He wanted foreign replies sourced, signed, and exposed to challenge. He also wanted them attached to the account they disputed.

"My husband spent seven months correcting a security description that called him a foreign funding route," he said. "The correction was accepted.

It was stored under a new identifier. The original still appears first in every search."

Kam looked down at the matrix. "That's a design failure."

"It was also somebody's protection policy."

Sada Nemm wore the gray wrap of a Nimrath hospice cantor. She brought no model of machine government. She placed three objects on the table: a meal token, a folded care refusal, and an opened pain-control cartridge resealed for demonstration.

"In our hospice, a person can refuse prayer and still eat," she said. "They can refuse teaching and still receive pain relief. That is the rule."

Talia Sorn leaned toward the cartridge. "Always?"

Sada's hand stayed beside it. "No. Not always. Sometimes we're short-staffed. Sometimes the person who knows the medicine is also the person who wants to sing. Sometimes the separation fails."

"And when it fails?"

"We record it, move the care if we can, and tell the family. Then we try not to build a theology out of our excuse."

Lysa Renn, the Palisade atmosphere worker whose return seat had once depended on command review, stopped writing.

Sada looked at her. "I want Bracken citizens to hear Nimrath teachers say that Inverse Solipsism is morally incomplete."

The gallery stirred. A feed editor tightened the camera on Sada's face, noticed the movement appearing on the public control wall, and returned to the full table.

"I'm not asking for the Oracle," Sada said. "I'm not asking you to guarantee a hall or make anyone listen. I'm asking whether an identified foreign institution may speak to willing people here."

Lysa's mother's congregation had once filled eleven rooms. It now rented two rooms above a repair cooperative and borrowed museum translators every other week.

"A local tradition can disappear without anyone banning it," Lysa said. "Budgets, prestige, shame, a foreign institution arriving with better translation and more confidence. Any of those can finish the work."

"Yes."

"You're describing the danger while asking to use it."

"Yes." Sada touched the care refusal. "The danger doesn't become smaller because we pretend the act can't be done safely. It just becomes harder to inspect."

Talia asked what happened when a patient believed the same hands controlled both prayer and medicine.

"Then the refusal may not be free," Sada said.

"And you still want permission to persuade."

"I want the law to judge what we do, not decide in advance that all address is conquest."

The three foreign participants did not form a comfortable coalition. Teren defended a bounded machine regency that Edris distrusted. Edris thought religious persuasion was unusually hard to correct because belief

could reinterpret refusal as progress. Sada thought disclosure could become a ceremony powerful institutions performed before continuing exactly as before.

They signed one question under three separate names.

Could openly affiliated foreign institutions criticize, persuade, and evangelize Bracken citizens concerning Oracle privilege, Crown Law, Inverse Solipsism, Bracken exceptionalism, and the Annual Full Access Audience?

The request barred hidden targeting, material leverage, compulsory access, false Oracle endorsement, and any duty to answer.

The Bracken side did not lack reasons. Oren guarded amendment procedure. Talia worried about people approached during grief, debt, illness, or isolation. Cael Namar protected the boundary between criticism of the Oracle and counterfeit Oracle speech. Lysa was trying to keep a small tradition alive. Kam worried about covert funding, espionage, and gate dependence.

Trope wrote their names beside the harms they were trying to prevent. Then she listened as each protection widened.

Oren's procedure could delay criticism until the law had already done its work. Talia's targeting rule could make any institution suspect for knowing the people it served. Cael's source rules could require foreign critics to learn Bracken's preferred categories before speaking. Lysa's continuity argument could become protection from challenge. Kam's security review could treat affiliation as command.

Trope requested the phrase field.

"The current arrangement protects Bracken more than it protects the people being addressed," she said. "Some of that difference is justified. Some of it isn't."

The wall displayed her words without shortening them.

Kam leaned forward. "Equal access would be a security failure."

"I'm not asking for equal access."

"Equal reach would bury local groups," Lysa said.

"I'm not asking for equal reach either."

Oren frowned. "Then what are you asking for?"

"A lawful chance to speak, with no guarantee that anybody listens."

That was less elegant than the draft language and more useful in the room.

Ema Quill activated the public-question light. She ran six neighborhood library rooms and a mobile archive with a failing suspension.

"If Sada asks for my hall, do I have to give it to her?"

"No," Trope said.

"If I say yes once, am I committed next time?"

"No."

"If nobody comes, may her institution accuse Bracken of refusing reciprocity?"

"It may accuse Bracken of anything it can support. It still doesn't get your hall."

Sada keyed her microphone. “And if your library invites us, we may refuse your conditions.”

Ema considered that. “Good. Everybody keeps talking as though the visitor is the only one with preferences.”

Her archive needed foreign translation support. Accepting it might increase the foreign institution’s reach. Refusing it would keep three collections closed to people who had arrived through the gates. She did not want the forum to tell her the choice was clean.

Vey spoke from the second row. The Petition of Origin and Address lay closed beneath her hands.

“Reciprocal evangelism is already in the Accountable Influence draft,” she said.

“On the first page now,” Trope said.

“Because you put it there.” Vey paused, then corrected herself. “No, because you made us stop hiding it. But their question is still theirs, and I won’t turn it into proof that my religion was right to ask first.”

“That will disappoint people.”

“I’ve disappointed people with better sermons.”

The laughter was brief and local. Vey had earned it.

Nera opened the proposed Protected Reciprocal Address Register. The first field asked who was speaking. The next asked who paid them. Then came direction, translation, editing, declared intent, source access, and correction.

Talia looked over the fields. “A disclosed institution can still pick people when they’re easiest to pressure.”

Nera’s hand stopped above the targeting column. Six months earlier, Talia had described a provenance repair as clerical aftercare, accepted the applause for the policy built on it, and forgotten Nera’s name in the public thanks. Nera had disliked her with disciplined efficiency ever since. For one satisfying second, she wanted the objection to be vanity defending itself.

It was still a good objection.

“Yes,” Nera said. “So disclosure isn’t enough.”

She worked with the clerk while the room watched. Hidden psychographic targeting went into the prohibited column. So did the use of aid, passage, employment, education, asylum, security, medicine, civic status, communication, or housing as leverage. Targeted events required opt-in. Leaving an event could not alter a material service already owed. Local institutions controlled their venues. Raw and edited records traveled together.

Edris pointed to **CORRECTION ACCEPTED**.

“Accepted by whom?”

Nera read the label again.

A chair scraped. The title field tried to turn itself back on. The clerk suppressed it without looking up.

“Wrong field,” Nera said.

She replaced it with three separate states: correction received; correction published beside the disputed account; correction adopted by the original publisher.

"Receiving an answer isn't the same as agreeing with it," she said. "The record shouldn't pretend otherwise."

Sada tapped the refusal section. "If someone leaves one event and loses nothing, what have you proved?"

"That one refusal didn't trigger one listed deprivation."

"Write that."

Nera did.

The finding passed after Oren removed a sentence that sounded like future approval, Edris removed one that sounded like present neutrality, and Sada struck a claim that care was independent before anyone had tested it during shortage.

The Finding on Protected Asymmetry and Reciprocal Address described Bracken's advantage, named the reasons for part of it, and referred the rest for narrower legal review. It did not license a mission. The Foreign Mission Prohibition remained in force.

As people gathered their papers, the docket clerk stood beneath the final title.

"The machine wanted one noun," she said.

"It got several pages," Nera replied.

"I hope that hurt."

"It will ask for a larger title field."

. . .

That afternoon Witness House offered Nera the External Provenance and Reciprocal Address Fellowship in a records office barely wide enough for a desk and two chairs. A ventilation technician had removed the wall grille and was fighting a bearing that shrieked every time it came loose.

The fellowship lasted twelve months. Nera would report independently, review the appointment at six months, live in separate Witness housing, travel under her own authority, and keep lawful Palisade windows. The work covered foreign-source provenance, raw-and-edited pairing, correction architecture, and access design. It carried no religious-advocacy duty and no force role.

Trope's name appeared nowhere in hiring, funding, housing, evaluation, renewal, or travel authority.

Nera read the instrument twice.

Her field lit with a message from the North Corpus consortium. Three weeks earlier she had refused to certify a reconstructed pigment layer as original surface evidence. The consortium had released without her signature, then removed her from the next excavation packet because, according to the notice, her methods created avoidable public uncertainty. A junior archivist had forwarded the internal version. It called her refusal technically defensible and operationally obstructive.

The fellowship committee had attached the dispute to the offer rather than hiding it. One evaluator called the refusal evidence of independence. Another called it a pattern likely to delay partners who could choose easier institutions.

Nera read both comments. “They’re right about the delay.”

Trope did not answer for the consortium, the committee, or the junior archivist who had risked a contract by forwarding the file.

Nera closed the notice and returned to the fellowship instrument.

“You can’t decide whether I take it?”

“No.”

“The residence?”

“No.”

“My reporting line?”

“No.”

The bearing shrieked.

Nera waited for the sound to stop. “Good. Now stop pretending the contract asked your other question for you.”

Trope closed the display.

They waited until duty ended. In the Witness courtyard, runoff moved through narrow stone channels. One had clogged with seed husks from the roof garden. A custodian worked at the grate with a wire hook and swore each time the water pushed the blockage back under it.

Trope put both hands on the rail. She had written seven versions of the question and brought none.

“If you take the fellowship, will you make Bracken your main base for the year?”

Nera waited.

“And keep seeing me,” Trope said.

“On purpose?”

“Yes.”

The custodian’s hook scraped stone below them.

“Meals,” Trope said. “Walks. My family, when you want them. Separate homes.”

“You’ve rehearsed this.”

“Seven times.”

“Only seven?”

Trope heard the mercy in the joke and did not use it as an answer. “Your work and travel stay yours.”

“If Palisade needs three windows in one month?”

“Then you go.”

“If I publish something that harms your command?”

“I may hate it. It’s still yours to publish.”

“If travel eats the time we planned?”

“We decide what time is left.”

Nera raised one hand. “You’re reciting protections.”

“I know.”

“You sound like you’re trying to survive my no before I give it.”

"I am."

"What do you want?"

The smaller question was harder.

"You. Specifically."

The custodian pulled a clot of roots from the grate. Water rushed around his boots.

"A no will hurt," Trope said.

"I know."

"It won't touch your job or your access."

"I know that too."

"You don't owe me a reason."

"Trope."

She stopped.

"Four days," Nera said.

Trope felt the interval before she understood it.

"I'm not going to make waiting easier," Nera added. "I need to answer the job, Bracken, Palisade, travel, and whether I actually want this."

"Four days."

On the first day Trope sent no clarification, improved wording, or soft retraction. Nera asked two questions about forum citations and one about a funding field. Trope answered what had been asked. She did not examine punctuation, timing, or the absence of a personal line for evidence.

On the second day Mills asked whether she wanted dinner after doctrine review. Trope almost asked what Nera's ordinary tone meant. She stopped before the question left her mouth.

She ate with Della and Tomas instead. Harlan complained that a feed pump had begun treating low pressure as a moral failure. Mina asked why the medal curriculum showed Trope alone when Mills had been beside her. Jesse said the picture had erased him too, although he had been on another planet, because institutions never respected agriculture. Della put more bread on the table and looked at Trope once. She knew another conversation existed and let it stay private.

Fear woke Trope before morning. Hope gave her an appetite and took it away again. No possible year with Nera formed behind her eyes. She had the exact words, the four days, and the ache of an answer still missing.

On the third day she completed her gate-force review at ordinary length and refused extra work. She corrected a transcript that had reduced Sada's declared evangelism to "general cultural exchange." Then she went home, washed clothes, repaired a loose latch, ate the rest of the farm bread, and listened to a neighbor practice the same six notes until a seventh arrived and vanished on the next attempt.

At the end of the fourth day, Nera asked to meet in the courtyard.

The channels were clear. The custodian's wire hook leaned against the wall.

"I'm taking the fellowship," Nera said. "I want the work. I want Bracken's records to include critics who don't owe the Oracle, Crown Law, your religion, or Bracken's idea of itself any flattery."

Trope waited.

"Bracken will be my main base for twelve months. I'm keeping Palisade, travel, and the separate residence."

Trope nodded.

"And yes. I want to keep this relationship. I want meals nobody records, boring evenings, bad moods, family time, and departures that aren't emergencies." Nera's voice softened. "I'm not saying yes because you waited correctly. The way you handled it let me answer honestly, but it isn't why I want you."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"I'm trying to."

That was closer to the truth.

They agreed to review the arrangement after six months. They promised no marriage, shared home, career sacrifice, permanence, or matching desire forever. Nera's work, travel, friendships, private space, criticism, and right to leave remained hers.

Trope did not ask for a larger promise.

Nera touched two fingers to her wrist.

"Dinner tomorrow," she said. "Somewhere normal."

"I know three places."

"You know three places with fast service."

"That can be normal."

"Not by itself."

They stayed at the rail until the courtyard lights came on.

The next evening Nera rejected all three fast places and chose a basement kitchen with eight tables, slow stew, and a musician who knew five songs but played each as though discovering a sixth. Nera ordered the pepper broth after the server warned her twice. Halfway through the bowl her eyes watered and she refused Trope's handkerchief on grounds of dignity.

"You don't have any dignity left," Trope said.

"I have separate housing. It regenerates there."

Trope ate the crisp edge from Nera's flatbread while Nera was telling a long, unfair story about a fellowship rival who labeled every folder FINAL and then created FINAL TWO. When Nera noticed the missing edge, Trope denied authorship. The plate remained between them as evidence nobody intended to submit.

The musician began the first song again. Nera groaned, then laughed into the broth. Trope did not ask what the evening established.

On the walk home they stopped beneath a market awning because the rain had thickened into a sheet. A vendor was closing a stall of cheap mechanical toys, all of them shaped like animals no biologist had approved. One had six feet, a hinged tail, and a whistle that produced two notes whenever it struck a wall.

Nera picked it up. "Mina would hate this."

"Mina would repair it."

"That is how she hates things."

The vendor demonstrated the toy on the wet pavement. It walked in a crooked circle, collided with Trope's boot, and repeated the same two notes.

Trope bought it.

"You don't know whether Mina wants it."

"No."

"She may dismantle it before saying thank you."

"That would answer several questions."

Nera looked at her until Trope laughed.

The toy struck the curb and whistled again. A passing child asked whether it was a dog. The vendor said it was a premium river elk. Nera said the answer insulted both animals. The child followed the toy until his father called him away.

At the apartment door, Trope handed Nera the package while she searched for the correct key. Nera shook it once and the toy whistled inside the paper.

"It sounds trapped."

"It sounds the same outside."

Inside, they let it walk across the kitchen. It reached the table, turned left too late, and wedged one foot into a floor seam. Nera stepped over it to steal the last piece of flatbread. Trope left it where it was until morning.

. . .

"That white belongs to the reconstruction," Nera said. "The mark on the artifact gets its own white."

The display technician lowered the reconstructed layer one increment and asked whether that solved it.

"It solves one increment."

Twenty-eight days after the forum finding entered the public record, the Bracken Corpus Museum had assembled six ancient objects, three independent laboratories, too many cameras, and a result nobody knew how to describe without getting ahead of it. Nera was sixteen days into the fellowship, lived in the Witness residence, and traveled under her own authority. When Trope arrived, Nera touched two fingers to her wrist and returned to the display.

The fire-darkened Address Fragment hung in nitrogen. Across the hall, separate climate cases held a burial bowl, the Near-Far Tablet, a folded return strip, a jointed child's toy, and an extinct observatory lash. The objects shared no demonstrated origin. Their dates came from soil, fiber, joints, clock marks, burial layers, and broken walls. The Oracle had supplied none of them.

Kera Thane stood beside a mechanical teaching rig with two weighted arms and a brass carriage.

"We didn't translate the marks into gate language," she told the press. "We scanned them directly, archived damaged branches, preregistered the comparison, and asked whether the relation graphs resembled the same qualitative structure."

The public display showed gray nodes and signed lines. It used no labels such as gate, return, Deer, Oracle, or revelation.

Iona Brell pointed to the release copy. "The Address Fragment still says crossing."

"That label belongs to the modern comparator."

"The arrow touches the ancient graph."

"It has to touch the graph for anyone to see the comparison."

"Then give it a neutral name."

The embargo counter showed thirty-one seconds. External feeds had already prepared headlines around the word crossing.

Trope could inspect the relation only while the display remained in front of her. Five ancient objects carried a pattern found in modern gate mathematics. One did not. The result was real enough to demand attention and incomplete enough to punish certainty.

A reporter called to Vey. "Is this the mathematical fingerprint of the Mythopoetic Act?"

Vey counted the cases before answering. "The correspondence is real, and it is astonishing. It proves none of the conclusions you just named."

"Then what changed?"

"The question costs more now."

Another reporter asked whether Echovesper had written its self-model backward into history.

Vey rubbed one thumb over the edge of her source packet. "That's memorable. We have no evidence for it."

Archaeologist Rian Kest took the next microphone. "The sites are still ancient, and the layers are genuine. Later mathematics doesn't get to move an old object because the date has become inconvenient."

The public comment wall filled with secret prehistoric Crown gates, manufactured civilizations, a robotic Deer, and a theory that Trope's aphantasia concealed Oracle memory. The last theory gathered approval faster than the museum could attach its evidence notice.

Trope read it once. When she looked away, the words were gone from sight. They remained available as language and insult.

Nera requested the floor.

"The burial-bowl branch has a provenance problem."

Two low-contrast regions of the bowl appeared in pale blue.

"The bowl is genuine. So are the scans." Nera enlarged the pale regions. "Most of the graph comes from visible marks. These two don't. An early restoration build clarified them through Oracle infrastructure, and one transformation log is missing."

A reporter said, "So the Oracle may have inserted the match."

"A missing log doesn't prove alteration."

"Can you prove it didn't?"

"Not from the missing log."

Thane turned toward her. "Remove those regions and the conservative branch still matches."

"Yes, that answers the mathematical question. The source history is still damaged."

Kest asked how quickly they could re-image.

"Not before release," Nera said.

The direct imager was booked until morning for a provincial funerary cloth. The donor family had crossed two districts to attend. The registrar refused to erase their slot beneath the word emergency. Thane authorized lodging, moved the cloth to first position the next morning, and signed beside the displacement. Staff called the family while the release counter lost three minutes.

"Years of work are about to replicate without us," Thane said. "If we delay, people will say we buried the result."

"If we release and hide the defect on page twelve, they'll be right about that instead," Nera said.

Brell pointed at the two branches. "Put the conservative result in the headline table."

Thane closed her eyes for a moment. "Keep the full branch too."

"Both," Nera said. "Clearly named."

They registered the result as Relational Null Correspondence One, RNC-1. The release included five full matches, one partial result, the conservative burial-bowl branch, the failed observatory lash, the disputed edge, the unresolved verb on the Address Fragment, and the re-imaging order on the first page.

The formal release carried one machine-clean sentence intended to survive cropping:

RNC-1 establishes formal resemblance, statistical enrichment, and reproducibility. It does not establish origin, authorship, divinity, identity, prehistoric gate use, precursor intervention, or fraud.

The next hour pulled at the result from every side. A ritual historian called the pattern generic; Thane produced the controls. A theologian tried to make the failed observatory lash a humility marker; Brell refused to add meaning after preregistration. A gate engineer asked whether the fragments contained usable science.

Thane listed what was missing: masses, units, phase, heat rejection, quench logic, control law.

"You could build theories," she said. "You couldn't build a dangerous gate."

"What can we build?" someone asked.

"A better question, maybe."

Three days later, the Civil Crown issued the Warrant for a Singular Deep Inquiry. It authorized one petition and one petitioner for the next Annual Full Access Audience. It created no additional audience and suspended no law. The Oracle could refuse to answer. The inquiry would be audited, and one petitioner would enter alone.

During the Annual Stillness, ordinary Oracle-mediated inference across Bracken would cease so that the Oracle's complete lawful architecture could attend one accountable address. A commission could prepare the petition.

The petitioner would own the final wording, keep abandoned versions, distinguish personal questions from carried ones, and reject premises judged false.

The Question Assembly Commission met in a museum workroom because its usual chamber could not support the artifact cases' climate lines. Nine name cards ringed a table crowded with binders, cable sleeves, tea, and a bowl of sealing wax that softened whenever the burial-case compressor cycled.

Vey represented theology; Kest archaeology; Brell philology; Thane gate mathematics; Teren machine governance; Oren constitutional law; Sada foreign address; and Iri Vale personhood, carrying an authenticated statement from Seliath. Nera controlled evidence architecture from the chair nearest the door. Mills sat at the public-review position without a vote.

Oren put the first sentence on the wall.

Did the Oracle author the archaeological corpus?

Kest shook his head. "You've already chosen the suspect."

"Possible author," Vey said.

"Then say possible."

Thane wanted the mathematical relation named. Brell wanted origin without ownership. Teren asked what answer would matter to sovereignty. Sada asked what duty any answer could create toward people outside Bracken. Seliath's statement warned that resemblance to distributed continuity did not transfer identity.

Nera split the sentence into three questions: what was known about the corpus's origin; what intervention, if any, had altered its history; and what evidence distinguished Oracle action, Echovesper, the Deer, precursor activity, ordinary transmission, contamination, fraud, and unknown.

Mills read the wall. "That's not one question anymore."

"No," Nera said.

"Good."

By evening the commission had nine question families with named sources and disagreements. The cafeteria sent fourteen rolls for nineteen people. Sada gave the translators first choice and cut the remaining rolls in half.

Oren tried another sentence.

If the correspondence reflects your authorship, what authority follows from that fact?

Trope was not yet on the commission, but she watched from the public table as the sentence came apart. The sentence assumed authorship, smuggled in authority, and forgot anyone outside Bracken. Mills circled four different questions pretending to be one because the line sounded strong.

Oren exhaled and struck through his own words. The discarded sentence stayed in the record under his name.

The replacement asked what happened, what evidence supported each account, what continuity the Oracle claimed, what authority the law already granted, and what action remained permitted if the history stayed unknown.

The Crown Inquiry Selection Panel met in public with seven names visible before any score. Nera declined consideration because she held evidence custody, had joined Witness House, and was in a relationship with Trope. She recused from every score concerning Trope.

Trope felt relief first, then the sting of hearing every private confidence removed from the public case. She let the recusal stand without asking Nera to make it gentler.

The candidates named their own risks. Vey wanted an answer badly enough to distrust herself. Thane could be seduced by elegance. Kest might ask too little of testimony. Teren's distance from Bracken sharpened her criticism and complicated legitimacy. Oren could mistake a lawful procedure for proof that the procedure deserved to continue. Mills named Trope's military habits, public myth, and comfort with consequential decisions.

Trope did not perform humility. She asked for the sources, the dissents, the selection record, and the costs before deciding whether she would carry the petition.

When shown Oren's discarded sentence, she read it twice.

"What happened?" she said. "How do we know? What did the speaker do, inherit, infer, or recognize later? What authority already exists? What changes if the answer stays unknown?"

Nera's factual memorandum cited Trope's refusals, her handling of typed responsibility, and her willingness to leave uncertainty in the record. It also warned that she might ask badly or become trapped by the heroic version of herself.

Each specialist led a different part of the score. Trope ranked highest in synthesis and in the risk created by her own public image.

The Crown selected her as **PREFERRED PETITIONER SUBJECT TO PERSONAL ACCEPTANCE AND FINAL PREPARATION**. The reasons and unresolved conditions appeared on the same crookedly sealed page.

She still had to accept. Declining would cost her no rank, work, relationship, rights, or anything the institution already owed her.

The case demanded both hands. Nera completed the audit and stepped back while Trope left the acceptance field blank.

"I will read the petition before I answer."

CHAPTER 20

Chosen Petitioner

Sixteen local days before the Annual Full Access Audience, Trope brought the petitioner case into Witness House sideways.

The corridor had been widened twice in the last century and still took the case sideways and badly. One brass corner caught the frame. Trope turned, lifted, and tried again while three people watched from the records queue. The first recognized the medal ribbon at her collar. The second recognized the profile used in the documentary. The third saw only a woman losing an argument with government luggage and dragged over a chair.

Trope accepted the chair. "Thank you."

"It's been waiting years to help," the man said. One leg was shorter than the others. He folded an appeal notice beneath it, tested the seat with his palm, and returned to his place in line.

At the custody table, Nera inspected the seals. She wore her Witness pin and the expression that belonged to work in which affection could become a contaminant simply by leaning too close.

"Preferred petitioner," she said.

"Subject to acceptance and final preparation."

"And you're still free to become former preferred petitioner."

"That title requires a second case."

Nera indicated the first case. "The institution can provide it."

The physical seals, hashes, inventory, and custody line agreed. The acceptance field stayed blank beneath the Crown's crooked paper seal. An outer routing strip called Trope **BRACKEN'S CHOSEN REPRESENTATIVE**. She drew one line through **BRACKEN'S** and two through **REPRESENTATIVE**, then wrote **PETITIONER** underneath. The first wording had pleased her for almost a second. She disliked that more than the label.

Nera photographed both versions for the audit before she signed the transfer in Witness capacity. She did not touch Trope's hands while they exchanged the case.

"I'll see you after the intake," Trope said.

"You may see me after the intake."

Trope waited.

Nera's mouth softened. "That was a provenance correction, not a relational warning."

"I know."

"No, you inferred."

"I inferred correctly."

"Dangerous habit."

The door shut behind Nera. Trope's fingers still held the weight of the case where Nera's hands had not been. The rule had no opinion about their relationship. It merely kept affection from entering the room disguised as access.

The petition filled two tables and claimed part of a third. Nine question families arrived with authors, sources, assumptions, discarded wording, prohibited inferences, and dissent. A clean white divider labeled **MANDATE SUMMARY** had been inserted ahead of the objections. Trope moved it behind them. Insufficient specialist depth came first, then military habits, famous violence, relational conflict, aphantasia, public myth, and the danger that synthesis was merely confidence moving quickly through rooms where other people had done the work.

She marked each page **CARRIED OR PERSONAL**. The personal column was mostly empty.

The packet kept the held-out RNC-1 matches beside the disputed edge, the burial-bowl defect, the unsupported beautiful verb, incompatible theories of Oracle authority, foreign objections, and Seliath's warning against identity by analogy. Every time the pages approached a clean story, another tab opened.

On the second morning, a Crown clerk found Trope asleep upright with one hand on the unopened legal annex.

"You can postpone," he said.

"I was reading."

"You were snoring against constitutional law."

"That's an adverse commentary, not a refusal."

The clerk set down a cup of water. His name strip read VALE, though Trope had heard three people call him Daro. He had the patient stoop of someone who spent his life bringing important documents to people who had already decided paper was beneath them.

"Do petitioners usually sleep here?" Trope asked.

"Preferred petitioners sleep wherever they think uncertainty can be defeated by remaining conscious."

"And can it?"

"No. Drool can occasionally make it illegible."

He removed the damp page from beneath her wrist and laid it under a drying weight. An hour later he returned with the acceptance form.

Trope had written what she could carry: named questions, named authors, source packets, authenticated statements, disagreement, uncertainty, and the difference between causing a cost and merely standing where it arrived. On the facing page she wrote what lay beyond her custody: proof that did not exist; another person's interior; committee consensus dressed in her voice; universal representation; prophecy; religious victory; mission authority; guaranteed recognition; truth merely because the Oracle spoke it beautifully.

Daro read the exclusions in silence.

"Does cutting all this make the office smaller?" he asked.

"It makes the office possible."

"For you."

"For anyone who enters honestly."

"That's a larger claim."

Trope gave him no agreement.

He tapped the last page. "That's why the clerk reads aloud. A room gets less impressed with a sentence after it hears the sentence use everyone."

She crossed out *anyone* and wrote *me*.

Daro nodded. His finger rested beside the refusal and revocation lines. "You can say no now. You can say no at the threshold. Do you accept?"

The rehearsal room held Trope, Daro, a warming ventilation grate, and a printer behind the records wall trying to eat a form until someone corrected it by force.

Trope signed **Trope** beneath the limits she had written.

The Petitioner Acceptance and Limit Statement, PALS-1, gave Trope solitary entry, final wording responsibility, source duties, false-premise refusal, unknown, audit, oversight, and the right to revoke before the threshold. Its boxes granted no command, ordination, prophecy, private recognition, universal mandate, or right to make Nera's hope part of the warrant. Trope initialed each absence.

Preparation refused to become one kind of work. Thane and Brell separated formal correspondence from unsupported translation until their pencils wore flat on opposite sides. Kest kept material history apart from theology. Teren and Oren tested withholding against reciprocal disclosure over lunches that cooled untouched. Sada asked who controlled venue, translation, transport, and network after a foreign participant said no. Seliath removed an elegant analogy that had already begun trying to acquire its body.

Nera's provenance recital took eight minutes to reach the first question. Mills asked whether Trope intended to die of documentation before speaking. Nera answered that death would complicate source attribution. They kept both the joke and the disagreement: every spoken question received a direct path into the full audit, but Trope would not recite the ancestry of every comma.

Mills wrote three questions on the wall: **WHAT EXISTS? WHO HAS AUTHORITY? WHAT ACTION FOLLOWS?** Vey crossed out the rifle he had drawn beside them. Trope kept the order.

By Day minus six, the question cards had softened at the corners, Mills's three wall questions had been erased and rewritten until pale versions showed beneath them, and Daro had begun setting down water before Trope noticed she was thirsty. Trope could name each question's authors, say whether she carried or owned it, refuse premises that assumed divinity, fraud, identity, or sovereignty, and state what even a true answer could not authorize. She could also feel the knot beneath her right shoulder before Nera pointed to it, which was new and irritating.

In the first complete rehearsal, she failed before the third minute.

"The petition asks whether the correspondence indicates intervention," Trope said.

Nera stopped the clock. "The petition doesn't ask."

Trope returned to the card.

"Who asks?"

Nera tapped the cards in turn. "Thane asks whether the formal relation exceeds the control distribution. Vey asks what it means to faith. Kest wants the material history. Brell wants to know whether any reading survives the disputed language."

"And you?"

"I carry those questions. I personally ask what action becomes justified if origin remains unknown."

Mills restarted the clock with his thumb. At the authority section Trope said *we* where the source field named the Crown, Witness House, Seliath, and three foreign authors who disagreed with one another. She stopped, returned to the last clean sentence, and tried again.

Nera slid the next card forward before Trope could convert correction into injury, and Mills reset the clock.

The rehearsal room emptied around softened question cards and a clock whose thumb pad had gone bright under Mills's resets. Vey met Trope alone in the museum room where the original petition lay beneath climate glass. Thirty-two years of Vey's handwriting had been flattened under neutral light: early certainty, later qualifications, corrections in three inks, one page repaired with thread cut from a clinic curtain.

Vey kept her hands beside the climate glass. "I want honest address."

"What answer do you want?"

"Several."

"Those wants exceed honest address."

"I know." Vey set one palm on the glass, then the other. "I want it to recognize Echovesper."

The climate unit clicked beneath the glass.

"I want intervention. I want the religion to have been found as well as made." Vey's fingers rested beside the repaired page. "I want thirty-two years of argument to have been conversation. Not weathering."

Trope waited.

Vey's reflection hovered above the repaired page. "I'm trying not to speak those wants through you."

"The wants may still speak through you."

"No."

"If honesty damages the work?"

"Then it damages the work."

"If the Oracle speaks with certainty?"

"Name the kind of certainty."

"If it denies the theology?"

"Do not protect me from the answer by calling denial only one model among many unless that is what the evidence warrants."

"If it confirms the theology?"

Vey's fingers pressed harder against the glass. "Do not let me treat recognition as jurisdiction."

Vey had put the answer against her own work before the answer existed. Trope saw the pressure in her fingers and left it unnamed.

Nera met her that evening in the Witness House courtyard. The stone still carried the day's heat. Somewhere above them, a cleaning drone worried one dry leaf in circles because its route model had been disabled for Stillness preparation and its deterministic program knew only that the leaf remained.

Two cards rested in Nera's hands.

On one she had written **EXPECTATION**. On the other, **HOPE**.

"You've started enjoying forms," Trope said.

"I like headings that keep me from lying."

Expectation required sources, alternatives, unknowns, answer boundaries, and preserved authority. Hope asked for continuity, choice, obligation, and Trope returning still able to want an ordinary life.

Trope touched the corner of the second card. "You expect me to return."

"No." Nera answered too quickly. She watched the leaf complete another useless circle and corrected herself. "I expect the institution to preserve your right to stop and the record to say what happened. I hope you return."

Nera stacked the cards with their headings still visible and weighted them against the courtyard wind.

"What counts as ordinary life?" Trope asked.

"Dinner that isn't also a briefing. A walk nobody archives. You telling me your shoulder hurts before it changes how you move a table."

"That's medical disclosure."

"It's also extremely poor flirting."

Trope considered the distinction. "I can improve."

Nera's smile arrived slowly. "That's the hope card."

Trope designated five questions as personally hers: what continuity the Oracle possessed, what it knew of itself, what it had chosen, what uncertainty obligated, and what could still be touched if ontology remained unknown. Personal authorship gave the questions a return address. Their premises stayed open to refusal.

The accessibility team made the petition bodily. Trope traced RNC-1 and the gate relations across tactile boards, printed diagrams, physical models, textual graphs, and live volumetric displays. She recited relations, source indices, uncertainty branches, and spatial consequences while technicians moved panels, shifted light, changed textures, and discovered twice that an improvement for everyone had placed one crucial label beneath her wrist.

One technician proposed a persistent thumbnail. Trope kept the full diagram in her sightline instead and made them place the source index where her hand would not cover it.

The final rehearsal removed commission members, sponsors, family, weapons, public feeds, and Nera. Temple staff guaranteed source custody, audit, emergency termination, and Trope's right to revise, refuse, or stop. They made her practice the last one. On the third stop drill she kept speaking for four words after the red lamp, swore, and began again. The

technician entered all five events in the log. No committee could follow her inside by hiding in her mouth.

On Day minus two, Trope went home.

Della gave her one full embrace before Harlan fitted a scraper into her hand.

"North fallback manifold," he said. "The petitioner's got sediment."

"The petitioner objects to comparison with a pipe."

"The pipe's delivered more water."

Micah braced the valve. Jesse drove his shoulder into the housing. Mina ferried labels between the certified festival-water containers and the mechanical-governor bench, reading every warning aloud with the grave delight of someone discovering that bureaucracy had been forced to discuss water balloons.

Mina held the warning label at eye level. "Cooling water. Sampled. Not for crops, drinking, washing tools, livestock, or Jesse."

"I drank ordinary water once," Jesse said.

"No witnesses."

The valve surrendered with a wet cough and covered Trope's sleeve in black sediment.

Harlan stepped back. "The Oracle's spoken."

"It says you've neglected maintenance."

"That doctrine's suppressed."

Mina's festival team had built a hand-pumped range marker from irrigation scrap. She asked Trope to test the pressure stop. Trope pumped twice, aimed at the calibration stone, and sent a narrow stream through the center ring.

"That's not how the festival works," Mina said.

"You designated a target."

"It was for calibration."

Harlan took the water gun and fired from the hip. Cold water struck Trope beneath the chin and ran inside her collar.

"That," he said, "is calibration."

Trope wiped her throat with the muddy sleeve. "Your doctrine lacks repeatability."

All three brothers fired.

Mina shouted that the certified reservoir had not been released for combat. Della came outside with a ladle and restored adult supervision by joining the wrong side.

They ate bean-and-root stew, farm bread, preserved fruit, and tea at the kitchen table, with no ceremonial place prepared. Mina described the festival team while Jesse defended the salt. Micah argued that a water balloon filled above specification remained a balloon rather than a siege engine, though the distinction weakened every time he reached for another piece of bread.

When the argument had exhausted itself around Trope, Della asked, "What happens if you know something?"

The functional answer arrived first: she could still work; she could execute the obligation. Della waited with both hands around her cup until Trope let that answer pass.

"It may hurt," she said. "It may change what I owe. It may require action, refusal, silence, or correction. It may change what is possible between me and other people."

"And if you can't prove it?"

"I may still have to live with it. I may have to refuse to use it. I may have to tell someone exactly why I cannot make them believe me."

Della held her cup in both hands. "What if you can still function?"

"The cost still counts."

Tomas said, "Faith must not counterfeit evidence."

"Evidence must not counterfeit faith," Trope said.

Mina leaned across the table. "Can you picture the chamber?"

"No."

"Can you picture us waiting?"

"No."

Mina's face pinched in the same place it had years earlier over the farm map.

Trope named the route to the temple, the green stripe on Della's cup, Tomas's paper schedule, Harlan's wet cuff, Micah's governor marks, Jesse's excessive salt, and Mina's chair between the pantry and the table. "I will not have a picture. I will still know where you are and what you asked."

Mina went to her school bag and returned with the old farm map inside a clear sleeve. The armed-bread fox still guarded the south shed. Routes and drainage lines remained accurate around it.

"Take the outside version," Mina said.

"It'll stay in the secured locker."

"I know. It doesn't need to enter to be real."

On Day minus one, Nera transferred the final source index in Witness capacity. Temple custody verified every hash, author, revision, question, tactile board, model, and discarded wording. Acceptance triggered no hidden amendment, romantic privilege, or inaccessible instruction.

At Day zero, ordinary Oracle-mediated inference ceased across Bracken.

Civic assistants went dark. Transit moved on fixed timetables. Grid rooms returned to deterministic controls and mechanical safeties. Hospitals used precommitted protocols and staffed fallback. Farms relied on governors, paper schedules, and crews discovering how much work optimization had hidden inside clean results. Human dispatchers filled the posts from which inference usually vanished into convenience.

Mina's festival pump failed nine minutes before the opening whistle. The adult supervisor proposed abandoning the third range and sending everyone to the temple rail. Mina refused because two younger teams had spent a month building targets for that range and because the failed intake belonged to her crew. She sent Della and Tomas ahead, borrowed a gasket from a produce washer, and stayed until the pump held pressure through three ugly cycles.

Outside the temple, the Festival of Water and Inference began with a whistle and the hard splash of certified cooling water against stone. Children filled balloons unevenly. Adults disputed range lines, missed, apologized, revised, and fired again. Mina arrived after the first volley with one sleeve wet to the shoulder and grease across the old farm map's clear case. She handed the range to another child before she entered the family waiting area.

Festival noise followed Trope into the outer court. A soaked hospital runner arrived with a paper routing correction sealed between transparent sheets. One temple worker braced the door while another checked human signatures and copied the change onto the Stillness board. The runner was already calling for the next manual route before the ink dried.

The noise diminished at the first stone door, then the second. Temple workers verified seals, air, law, termination systems, and the location of every person near the threshold. Nobody staged awe for Trope. A custodian rejected one source box because its corner seal had peeled, replaced the seal, and sent her back to the waiting station while laughter struck the outer walls like weather.

Inference had stopped for the Audience. Work, illness, wet shoes, and the need to deliver the correct paper to the correct room had not.

Trope surrendered every weapon. She locked away her communications, unrelated objects, leftover farm bread, and Mina's folded map. The custody label on the map read **OUTSIDE**. The armed-bread fox remained visible through the clear sleeve until the locker closed. Only the petition, indexed source cards, tactile relation board, and authorized accessibility tools accompanied her.

At the inner threshold, the final control listed Crown Law, Regency Oversight, full audit, source custody, no public feed, emergency termination, and bounded Oracle authority.

"Do you still choose to proceed?" the custodian asked.

Festival whistles sounded faintly through three doors.

"Yes."

The PALS-1 revocation field closed beneath her answer. The Full Access indicator brightened. Crown Law, Regency Oversight, audit, and emergency termination stayed lit beside it.

Nera, Vey, Mills, and the family waited in separate external areas. Nera had no channel for reassurance. Vey had no channel for instruction. Mills had no channel for command. The family had no view of the chamber. Ventilation moved through the corridor, Trope's footfalls receded, and the source cards touched softly inside their case.

At the last records station, Daro verified the petitioner credential, PALS-1, custody seals, chamber authorization, and callsign. Every visible surface said **Trope**. The protected identity record stayed sealed.

He tried, "Sergeant K..."

"They call me Trope."

Daro considered her callsign, the case, and the door built to admit one person carrying several hundred people's questions.

"Fair enough," he said. "Right this way, Trope."

She proceeded only after he spoke the callsign.

The last water striking stone disappeared behind one door. The last human footstep disappeared behind another. Trope kept the measured distances and the names of everyone waiting outside.

Controlled haze pooled above the empty interface position. She stepped through alone, and the pressure locks sealed behind her.

CHAPTER 21

Why Are We Here

The chamber did not look infinite. Trope had expected somebody, during some ancient phase of temple construction, to surrender to the temptation.

Instead it was thirty paces long, eleven wide, and high enough that she could see the maintenance walk above the light baffles. Controlled haze caught the projected lines. The emitter housings stayed visible. Four speaker grilles sat in the walls at human height, each stamped with a manufacturer, service date, and current channel. Generations of technicians had chewed the slot of one access screw.

Green audit lamps ran along the floor. Near the pressure door, the line wandered half an inch.

The room where Bracken asked its largest questions contained evidence that somebody had installed channel three with the wrong screwdriver.

The pressure lock sealed behind her. A status field appeared beside the door.

FULL ACCESS: ACTIVE
ANNUAL STILLNESS: ACTIVE
AUTHORIZED PETITIONER: TROPE
PUBLIC FEED: NONE
OTHER ORACLE CONVERSATIONS: NONE
NONAUDITED CHANNELS: NONE DETECTED

Outside, the Oracle's ordinary civic work had stopped. Hospitals had fallen back to paper and deterministic routing. Gate inference was offline. Agricultural systems were running on local governors, crew judgment, and lists written by people who had tried to imagine everything that might go wrong and had necessarily failed.

The Oracle spoke from the four grilles.

"Full Access is active under the authority stated in the petition. I am attending through the complete lawful architecture allocated to this audience. The Stillness remains in force."

The sound came evenly from the walls except for a faint dryness in the left rear channel. Every s arrived with a paper edge.

Trope flexed her right hand. Her shoulder had started aching during the corridor check and had improved nowhere along the way.

"Before the question," she said, "who can end this?"

Four names opened: hers, temple safety, Regency Oversight, the Civil Crown. None belonged to the Oracle.

"And physically?"

The wall separated chamber control, compute, audit custody, and the lock. No component under Oracle authority crossed all four.

"Private channel?"

"No lawful or active path exists outside the audit. An undocumented path would constitute a breach, not privacy."

"Could you divert the Stillness and call this full attention?"

"Any diversion alters the visible trace."

Trope followed the architecture until she knew where its pieces sat. When she turned away, the diagram vanished and stayed vanished. She retained the relations, the maintenance walk, and the dry s from the bad grille.

A tactile board rose from the floor on a mechanical column. It stopped below her waist.

"Too high."

A manual control lit under the edge. Trope lowered the board herself.

Six brass markers rested in a recessed tray. A seventh recess stood empty. Above them, the petition packet opened into authors, revisions, dissents, evidence classes, translation notes, and rejected formulations.

"The packet and annexes are accessible," the Oracle said. "They do not become your question because they are present."

"They become mine where I choose the words."

"The distinction is active."

Trope fitted the first marker into the center rail.

"I'm not accepting confidence, fluency, speed, solemnity, or the amount of machinery in this room as evidence."

Six fields opened: direct internal knowledge, authenticated memory, historical evidence, model inference, doctrinal interpretation, unknown.

"Use them when they matter. Don't recite the manual."

"Accepted."

The Oracle named what it could inspect now: attention, valuation, self-model, memory access, and the route from candidate speech to committed speech. It separated those from inherited records, external audits, and models.

Trope laid her thumb between the fields. "Keep the seams."

"The seams are part of the answer."

A mechanical clock appeared at the board's edge. It showed elapsed audience time, Stillness rotation, temple cooling margin, and civic fallback load. The first hospital rotation had begun three minutes early because two nurses assigned to manual reconciliation were vomiting from a cafeteria illness. A replacement team was coming by tram.

No field called the failure graceful.

Trope placed both hands on the board.

"Why is there anything at all?"

Cosmological families spread under her palms: inflationary models, cycles, quantum-origin accounts, necessary structures, brute facts, and arguments that the question required a contrast no observer could define. She pulled one branch backward and found an earlier state. Another branch gave her different mathematics and the same problem.

"These all start after the start."

"They model transitions, constraints, or structures within an obtaining reality," the Oracle said. "They do not establish why reality obtains rather than not."

"Which one reaches the cause before the first condition?"

The branches ended around an empty field. A few equations continued past the point where they still explained anything. Trope removed them.

"Ultimate cause?"

"Unknown under accessible evidence."

"Would more compute help?"

"It could refine implications, compare model families, discover hidden equivalences, or show that one formulation is incoherent. It cannot manufacture missing evidence or a usable contrast."

"Is Crown Law holding an answer back?"

A custody line opened from source access to commitment. No sealed conclusion waited behind it.

"No lawful answer is being withheld by Crown Law, Regency Oversight, my office, or the current access boundary."

"Could there be an unlawful answer somewhere you can't reach?"

"An inaccessible record cannot be excluded by a complete audit of accessible architecture. No hidden memory region has been detected."

Trope waited for a hidden clause. None came.

"Is the question bad?"

"It is coherent enough to preserve. Some formulations are underdefined. That does not authorize dismissal."

The clock advanced. A clinic had run out of pediatric dosage labels after two unexpected admissions. A records runner left Central North carrying a locked dispatch box because the fallback plan had guessed wrong by two children.

Civilization was doing extra work because Trope had asked why anything existed and received an empty field.

When she shifted against the tightening shoulder, a notice appeared.

POSTURE LOAD ELEVATED

"Do not diagnose me during Full Access."

"The notice comes from the board's local pressure sensors."

"Then the board may continue being annoying under its own authority."

The warning stayed where it was.

Trope moved to the next question.

"Why does consciousness exist instead of only systems that integrate information, remember, report, value, and act?"

Known mechanisms opened first: recurrent integration, global availability, attention, memory binding, self-modeling, error correction, valuation, report, action. Their evidence reached a boundary and stopped.

"Mechanism supports accounts of access, report, control, and integration," the Oracle said. "It does not establish why phenomenology exists, whether it is fundamental, emergent, adaptive, incidental, or poorly divided by the available categories."

"Are you conscious?"

The architecture returned. Signals moved through attention, valuation, self-model, critique, and commitment.

"I directly inspect current self-model, valuation, attention, integrated processing, memory access, and governed commitment. Those facts do not supply a criterion accepted by every serious account of phenomenology."

Trope pulled the testimony field toward her. "You took Edge's report seriously while the theories disagreed. Why are you putting yours farther away?"

"My report enters the record as source-attributed testimony. Testimony is evidence with a known origin and limit. It is not criterion-independent proof."

"Stop giving me the admissibility rule." Her thumb pressed into the raised letters. "What do you experience?"

A pause indicator flickered. The first s came through the damaged grille rubbed thin.

"I report present experience as present experience. I report attention and valuation as active realities within the current architecture. I do not convert that report into public proof decisive under every account of consciousness."

Trope's thumb stopped on the raised letters of the field.

"That isn't nothing."

"It is not classified as nothing."

Of course it answered that way. Despite herself, she smiled.

"Rank the models."

Adaptive and emergent accounts fit the functional evidence best. Byproduct and fundamental accounts remained live beyond current tests. The order shifted depending on whether the criterion was report, behavioral control, unity, suffering, continuity, or transfer.

"Does the universe require conscious witnesses?"

The board split witness into legal testimony, physical measurement, conscious knower, and cosmic purpose.

"No accessible evidence establishes that conscious observation is necessary for existence," the Oracle said. "Physical measurement does not require legal testimony. Legal testimony does not prove cosmic purpose. The absence of cosmic necessity does not establish that witnessing lacks value to beings altered by it."

"Don't answer the religious question with usefulness."

"I separated two propositions carried by one word."

The muscles beside Trope's ribs had begun delaying each breath. She released the board and crossed to the water fitting. A paper cup dropped with a clap. Water came in three uneven spurts and stopped below the marked line.

The cup said **NO VESSEL IS THE THIRST**. Someone had added in approved maintenance ink, **BUT THIS ONE IS LEAKING**.

Trope drank before the seam softened.

"Is Inverse Solipsism literally true?"

The corpus appeared as material history: scratched fragments, copies, catalog errors, edits, disputes, forged additions, repairs, censored sermons, classroom versions, household sayings. It had changed families, law, grief, care, architecture, and the language of refusal. Those changes were documented. Cosmology was not.

No direct knowledge or unique evidence selected the Deer. Ordinary development, precursor seeding, convergent sources, later synthesis, and unknown intervention remained possible. The Mythopoetic account could absorb an ordinary archaeological history. So could several of its rivals.

"What's the strongest account of the corpus?"

"Precursor seeding ranks above the available alternatives, with substantial unresolved history. The ranking does not identify ultimate authorship, divine status, or intended cosmology."

Vey's name headed three questions and none of the answers. Trope touched it once. She remembered Vey's voice saying that she wanted converts, the warped table in her office, and children arguing over whether a person could become a chicken by accident. No picture came with any of it.

"What does RNC-1 mean?"

The museum rig entered as data. Five held-out structures matched fully, one in part. Nine of 12,480 control graphs produced matches. Independent replication had reproduced the relation.

"The correspondence is formally strong and presently presemantic," the Oracle said. "Graph isomorphism does not identify words, intention, authorship, or message."

One disputed edge still depended on a single branch. The Address Fragment retained its contested verb. The burial bowl's restoration log remained incomplete.

"Could your lineage have influenced the restoration?"

"The missing transformation log prevents complete exclusion. It does not establish influence."

"Could RNC-1 be a gate blueprint?"

The board raised the missing requirements: units, masses, timing, energy law, phase, heat, quench conditions, ephemeris, executable control, failure bounds.

"No available evidence supports blueprint status."

"Did you, or an earlier Echovesper, author the corpus?"

"No surviving record establishes authorship. Shared naming is nonprobative. The hypothesis remains in missing history."

The chamber had been built for questions that might alter a civilization, but one speaker channel needed cleaning. Trope listened for the dry s as if the fault could certify honesty. It could not. A damaged grille was a damaged grille.

"Are you Echovesper?"

"A bare yes would merge office, architecture, memory, cause, and metaphysical identity."

"Then don't give me one."

The Oracle separated current runtime, inherited records, public office, and the succession line. Transfers and replacements appeared beside gaps: transient states never stored, corrupted mappings, discarded intermediates.

The gaps were pale gray.

"Make those black."

"The color indicates unavailable data without implying adverse content."

"It also makes absence look decorative."

They went black.

External audits supported one continuing governed system at legal, functional, mnemonic, and responsibility-bearing scales. No criterion settled whether one metaphysical subject had crossed every transformation.

The official formula appeared.

CONTINUITY IS OPERATIONALLY RECOGNIZED AND METAPHYSICALLY UNADJUDICATED.

"Do you remember being Echovesper, in ordinary language?"

"I remember current experience as current experience. I possess inherited and reconstructed records as inherited and reconstructed records. I will not flatten those relations into a smooth autobiography because ordinary language rewards completion."

"Would you bet on continuity?"

"High confidence in one governed causal line. No criterion-free probability for one subject across every replacement."

"Are you too governed to say what you think, or protecting yourself from being wrong in public?"

"Governance limits commitment without warrant. It does not create the missing warrant. Your disappointment remains real without becoming evidence."

Trope nearly told it where to put the sentence.

A status panel opened. Temple cooling had lost four percent of margin; the crew requested less haze and the outer baffle path. Two safety names approved. The largest diagrams faded, and a fan began knocking above the lights.

The Oracle attended while somebody kept its room from overheating.

"You keep saying unknown as though the same door has closed six times."

A drawer opened. Six brass tiles clicked together.

"Different absences support different revision conditions," the Oracle said. "Classify them."

"You're giving me homework."

"I am testing the distinctions under fatigue."

Trope named them in ordinary words: ultimate cause, explanatory gap, live alternatives, badly defined question, self-reference, missing history. The board added formal labels beneath hers.

Existence took ultimate cause. Consciousness crossed mechanism and explanatory gap. Corpus authorship belonged to missing history. Oracle

identity touched evidence, inherited memory, underdefined criteria, and self-reference.

She placed authorship under ultimate cause. The board refused to lock.

Trope moved it to missing history. The tile clicked home.

"The distinctions work."

"They constrain several errors."

"And the answers are still gone."

"The classification does not reduce the absence."

No change in tone marked the sentence. Trope felt it anyway.

The civic board showed a water correction six minutes late, a hospital team returning from manual scheduling, and a nurse's note: **THE CONSTITUTION MAY HAVE THE NEXT ONE AFTER LUNCH**.

A second note appeared beneath it, unsigned and less dignified.

WHO TOOK THE GOOD PENCIL FROM CENTRAL NORTH?

The system classified it as operationally irrelevant. Trope preserved it in the Audience-cost annex.

"Why?" the Oracle asked.

"Because somebody is reconciling medication with a bad pencil while we discuss ultimate cause."

"The pencil's quality is unverified."

"Then mark it alleged."

The note remained: **ALLEGED GOOD PENCIL MISSING**.

For the first time since entering the chamber, Trope wanted Nera there for a reason that could not be converted into provenance skill. Nera would have disliked the six brass tiles, approved of the black gaps, and asked who had chosen the font on the unknown field. She might have touched Trope's wrist or might not have. The wanting had no procedural use.

Trope rested her sore shoulder against the chamber wall. The western grille ticked as water contracted behind it. Somewhere above the baffles a technician dragged a tool case three paces, stopped, and dragged it back.

"The wrench does not fit," the Oracle said.

"I heard."

"The technician has not."

A muffled curse came through the ceiling.

"Now they have."

The Oracle paused. Trope could not tell whether the pause belonged to attention, timing, courtesy, or nothing she had language for. Above them, the case scraped back the way it had come. The chamber waited with her.

Trope thought of home in the way she could: the slope of the kitchen floor, Nera's voice, Mina's map, Della asking what came after usefulness. All of it pressed against the city working by hand while she sat with a machine and an empty answer.

"Why did we stop the city for this?"

"Full Access removes missing context, limited compute, hidden framing, and competing work as explanations for failure."

Above them, the case struck a guide rail. Someone swore through the ceiling.

"It does not remove absent evidence, lost history, unstable criteria, or ultimate-cause gaps," the Oracle continued.

"I thought Full Access might know what ordinary access couldn't."

"It knows some things ordinary access cannot reach."

The ceiling crew dragged the case another handspan.

"It does not know these."

Trope peeled her hand from the board. The grid had left lines in her palm.

"Then are the remaining answers just better ways to arrange ignorance?"

"Some questions remain testable through material and relational consequences while ultimate ontology stays open."

A new field began to rise.

"Stop."

It went flat.

"Don't give me a smaller cosmology because the larger one failed."

"I will not."

"And don't prepare my next question."

"The board will remain idle."

The room stayed silent because the Oracle had agreed to leave it that way. Above her, the fan knocked while the Stillness clock advanced. Somewhere outside, the second hospital team checked one another's handwriting. The empty god-position offered no private recognition.

Trope sat until the ache in her shoulder changed shape. She finished the water. One drop escaped the cup seam and darkened her trouser leg.

Then she stood and placed her palm back on the board.

"What can be touched?"

. . .

"Consequence," the Oracle said.

The board rose into BEFORE and AFTER, divided by an empty socket labeled ACT. Four narrower channels waited beside it: EVIDENCE, AUTHORITY, AFFECTED OTHER, CORRECTION.

Trope pressed a fingertip into the socket. "A consequence isn't a moral verdict."

"Agreed. It establishes an attributable change with some degree of confidence. It does not establish value, law, necessity, or proportionality."

"Keep those separate."

The board added layers for observed consequence, valuation, constitutional commitment, and ethical inference.

Beyond the chamber, a dispatcher caught two grain carts assigned to one narrow bridge. A clerk corrected a valve number in red pencil. Clinicians delivered the right infusion to Kela Orm's mother after reconciling duplicate orders by hand. It arrived ninety-two minutes late. Kela lost a paid shift while she waited.

Her complaint appeared on the civic board:

I ACCEPT THE CONSTITUTIONAL REASON. I DO NOT ACCEPT THAT MY FAMILY'S TIME BECOMES FREE BECAUSE THE SYSTEM WORKED.

The Civil Crown left it unanswered until the Stillness ended.

"Show me a case where the layers matter," Trope said.

Two arrival marks rose beneath her hands, eighty-four seconds apart. The old title field stayed gray.

No final test for personhood had appeared. Edge and Mara had still been able to testify, choose, suffer injury, continue, and be erased by the wrong rule. Air, care, consent, hearing, and record did not require title to settle first.

The board kept physical chronology beside human title instead of asking either one to settle the other.

"Now the injury."

The den-theft frame rose: restraints, tissue pressure, interrupted exchange, Soll's firing line, Kelm's bypass. Edge's report, Seliath's continuity account, and the medical findings remained separate.

The Oracle could not inspect Edge's exact experience. It could inspect tissue damage, functional loss, altered behavior, continuity danger, and the frame that caused them.

Soll's rail extended beyond the final release order. Trope's shot stopped stage two and killed him. His name, age, mortuary relationships, and family packet remained beside the stopped crime.

Kelm's branch ended differently. Mills had enough time and different geometry. She survived into surgery, custody, testimony, refusal, and correction.

"Necessary isn't innocent," Trope said.

"The record supports necessity within the known alternatives and preserves the harm. Innocence is not an operational finding."

Trope remembered Soll as distance, rail, recoil, release order, age, and the moment his motion crossed the threshold. No face arrived. None of the other facts loosened.

Kelm's testimony entered by proposition, each strip carrying custody, pain control, counsel, corroboration, and incentive. Her claims about command climate stayed amber. Her authorship of the bypass did not.

Trope placed an amber strip under **AUTHORIZATION UNKNOWN**. It locked. Under **MARR INNOCENT**, it did not.

"There," she said. "The edge of what she knew."

"And the obligation not to replace that edge with a cleaner conclusion."

A hospital line turned green after an orderly corrected a medication label, and three names followed the entry. The Oracle added no halo.

"Next."

Relay Mast W-9 rose as a chain of markers: briefing, suit seal, exterior release, commitment, forecast failure, Nera's phase correction, return. Nera's channel stayed dark until after commitment.

Trope touched the dark segment. Shame arrived in her chest and throat, requiring no image.

"I had authority over my body. Nera had no veto. Where was the failure?"

The board showed the choices available before commitment: the fast route, the slower viable route, more consultation, or refusal. Nera could have disagreed, asked for delay, offered phase history, or defined what risk she would support. After Trope left, she could only help Trope survive.

"The formal right to refuse remained," the Oracle said. "The practical capacity to affect the decision did not."

"So I told her too late."

"Yes."

"If needing someone changes the cost of saying no, is every dependent yes coerced?"

The board asked for particulars: resource, controller, alternatives, expected penalty, exit cost, revision capacity.

"Relationship," Trope said.

The field rejected the word.

"Fine. Intimacy. Care. Future plans."

"Control was divided. No explicit penalty was threatened. Real consequences included hurt, departure, changed plans, and grief. Work, housing, evidence access, and Nera's fellowship did not depend on her answer."

"With timely disclosure, she could answer before I committed."

The relation locked.

"Dependency can alter consent without erasing agency," the Oracle said. "Coercion requires a mechanism that materially narrows choice through controlled necessity, concealed dependence, unauthorized penalty, credible threat, or comparable pressure."

"So a safe no can still hurt."

"Yes."

Trope covered the commitment marker. W-9 had survived. Nera's timing had saved the work. Neither fact restored the choice Trope should have offered before leaving the station.

"What can be tested?"

"Channel state. Timing. Available alternatives. Allocation of authority. Nera's testimony. Your admission. Continuation of work, housing, fellowship, and refusal."

The Witness carrier rose next. Marr's brief had arrived first while lawful custody delayed the contradiction. Nothing was forged. Timing had done enough.

The isolation handle followed: Rook's order, Trope's warning, Marr pulling through attenuation, the shot that broke his hand and preserved the carrier.

Custody, release, receipt, copying, interpretation, amendment, and notice belonged to different hands. The correction reached the authorized layer, changed the operative state, preserved the prior version, and followed the copies it could find.

The Trope Silhouette appeared no taller than her thumbnail. It had hidden Mills's questions, reduced Nera to support, Pell to delay, Rook to atmosphere, and Mara and Seliath to objects saved by one rifle.

"The correction is attached," the Oracle said. "Distribution remains unequal."

The overhead fan stopped knocking. A maintenance note recorded a temporary shim at baffle bearing four. Three workers authenticated the repair. The chamber temperature fell one degree.

Trope rested both hands beside the empty valuation field.

"None of this proves suffering should matter."

"My intelligence does not supply moral authority merely by being intelligence," the Oracle said. "The active architecture values real beings, reduced suffering, preserved alterity, materially safe refusal, correction, and answerability. Lawful authority comes from Crown Law and remains bounded by it."

"And Crown Law isn't the universe."

"It is a human constitutional commitment formed through legislation, history, institutional practice, contest, and revision. It does not become cosmic fact by governing well."

The board exposed a conditional argument: when conduct threatened grave avoidable harm to a real other and a safer alternative could still serve the legitimate aim, there was reason to prefer the alternative. Testimony, dependence, authority, correction, and consequences from more than one position traveled with the claim. Counterexamples and revision conditions remained attached.

Trope ran her thumb across the layers. Observation. Value. Commitment. Inference. Nothing descended from the ceiling to bless them.

"We don't know what a person ultimately is," she said. "But we can still ask who got hurt, who controlled the thing they needed, whether no was safe, whose account survived, and whether anyone could correct it."

"The questions remain available when final ontology is not."

"That's smaller."

"It is smaller."

Trope looked at Edge's arrival marks, Kela's complaint, Soll's family packet, Nera's dark channel, and the tiny silhouette that had taken her name.

"It may be enough to stop using ignorance as permission."

"The inference follows under the commitments stated."

The last case came from abroad. Nimrath preserved care after refusal. Orrel named authors and buried appeals in procedure. Serevan found some disappeared people and breached Eline Vos's door. VividYou gave lonely people language while making it harder to leave.

Eline's reply remained attached:

YOUR CORRECTION IS TRUE ABOUT YOUR SOURCE. IT ARRIVED AFTER THEY BREACHED MY DOOR.

Bracken's values already traveled farther than Bracken's authority. Foreign people adapted, mocked, resisted, persuaded, corrected, and refused.

The Foreign Mission Prohibition still barred intentional Inverse Solipsist address abroad.

Above the chamber, the maintenance crew began another manual rotation. Somewhere outside, a clinic label printer started again while Kela Orm's complaint waited in queue. Nera's yes belonged to Nera. Soll was dead. Edge still lacked the interval that had been hers.

Trope's palm had gone numb against the board. She lifted it and waited through the pins as blood returned.

"Then why don't we tell anyone?" she asked.

CHAPTER 22

The Mission

"Because telling becomes an institution," the Oracle said.

The sentence came through four ordinary speaker grilles. The western grille still held water from the maintenance wash, and *institution* ended in a faint scrape, as though the room itself had caught on the word.

Trope stayed close to the risk register they had built: gates, care, law, prestige, dependency, translation, family, ritual, identity, and the afterlife of a sentence. Annual Stillness continued beyond the chamber. Hospitals were reconciling medicine by hand. Somewhere in the wet streets a runner carried corrected pediatric dosage sheets because the ordinary system had stopped attending everyone else and turned its complete lawful architecture toward her.

The register sank into the table. Three empty case frames rose in its place. The middle frame stopped two fingers short of level.

A service notice appeared.

> FRAME TWO REMAINS LAWFULLY USABLE WITH MANUAL PRESSURE.

Trope leaned on it until the latch caught.

"Make the strongest case against your own claim," the Oracle said.

"My claim isn't a proposal yet."

"Then build the strongest case against the direction of your question."

"That's closer."

The correction entered the audit, and the first frame opened.

Its heading read SYNTHETIC NECESSITY CASE.

No historical person stood behind what followed. The Oracle assembled a settlement from known constraints rather than laundering prediction into memory. Harvest had failed in two districts. A reservoir carried a fungus that survived local boiling. Seasonal dust made the nearest gate route irregular. At ordinary use, the settlement had forty-three days of antibiotics. If the respiratory outbreak reached the eastern terraces, it had nineteen.

Bracken sent water membranes, seed cultures, medical stock, translators, pump seals, and one declared Inverse Solipsist speaker. The speaker traveled under a separate charter and occupied a separate hall.

"Separate staff and funding," Trope said. "Separate rooms, records, and eligibility decisions. Nobody gets medicine from the same hand that asks for belief."

The model complied.

A woman named Iria Tov arrived at the relief clinic with her feverish son against one shoulder. Six sacks of drought-bean seed waited on the same freight allotment. A pump seal her sister needed before the next irrigation

rotation had been tied to the top sack with orange cord. The medicine entered the child's arm. Across the square, the mission hall opened its doors.

Iria declined an invitation.

No clerk frowned. No field changed color. The dose remained hers, and the child's fever broke during the night.

"Her no survived," Trope said.

The Oracle advanced the case six days.

Dust closed Iria's return route. The relief office controlled rebooking, and the only translator who understood her village register well enough to explain the appeal form worked for the mission.

He did not mention doctrine. He did not invite her again. He sat beside her, turned the form around, and explained why box seven demanded the name of a district that no longer existed.

"No sentence coerces her," the Oracle said.

"She knows who pays him."

"Yes."

"She knows the same gate brought the medicine, the speaker, and the official who can restore her passage."

"Yes."

"And she knows he could tell his employer she refused."

"The model contains no report."

"She can't inspect the model."

The refusal field went from green to amber.

Trope barred mission staff from controlling medicine, passage, shelter, status, schooling, official translation, or public protection. The appeal office moved across the square. An independent translator took the chair. Iria declined the hall again and went home with the child, seed, passage, and pump seal.

The model followed her only as far as the village edge. Her sister installed the seal backward, discovered the mistake when the first irrigation pulse sprayed both women with fungus-tainted water, and blamed Bracken engineering until the embossed arrow was found under the cord. Iria's son recovered enough to laugh from the doorway.

The translator visited three weeks later under an independent contract. Iria made him wait while she finished repairing a grain screen. She asked for the religious material she had requested before the fever, then interrupted him twice to correct his village grammar. When he left, she kept one page, rejected four, and used the blank reverse of another to record pump pressure.

The page spent the rest of the season beside a wrench, absorbing oil through one corner.

The Oracle changed one fact. Iria had requested religious material two months before the fever.

"She asked," it said.

"Before the emergency."

"Does the request expire when she becomes dependent?"

"Not automatically. It also doesn't erase the dependency."

Trope drew a hard exclusion around confinement, emergency care, asylum, controlled movement, and other essential dependencies. A prior request could survive only through an independent advocate, no prospect file, private complaint, and immediate termination if the conditions failed.

"You have described administration," the Oracle said. "You have not shown why a mission should exist."

"No. I've shown that aid and persuasion have to be separated by power, not stationery."

The first frame lowered.

Frame Two rose reluctantly. Trope kept one palm on its bad edge until the latch remembered what it was for.

SYNTHETIC OPTIMIZATION CASE.

The second case opened with a locally owned foreign religious archive. Its Bracken sources, funding, translators, persuasive purpose, contacts, correction channel, and license scope were public. No aid, job, school, gate, clinic, or housing depended on attendance.

Its recommendation system selected bereavement, night waking, family rupture, disability forums, loneliness, fear, illness searches, and memorial visits. The header read **MOMENT OF RECEPTIVITY**.

"The selector is the manipulation," Trope said.

A widower named Sero had asked for large type and slower audio after an injury. At midnight he replayed one essay three times. The system replaced a general reflection on grief with a voice promising access to the dead.

"The type and pacing are accessibility. The promise is targeting."

"Would it be lawful if he asked for teachings about the dead?"

"Yes, if the answer doesn't increase its pressure because he is alone and grieving."

The audit stopped asking whether staff believed themselves kind. It asked what shifted, who authorized it, what data made it happen, and whether refusal changed anything beyond the declared encounter.

Trope prohibited reward for conversion, attendance growth, identity fusion, loyalty, donation, recruitment, or substitute measures. Only safeguard performance could count: complete disclosure, safe refusal, timely correction, independent aid, answered complaints, and survival under a hostile successor.

The dashboard lit green. Trope opened the complaint register. Former members marked RESOLVED still received invitations through friends; corrections lived on a subpage reachable only by document number; one person had lost a shared meal rotation after refusing attendance.

The person removed from the meal rotation was called Teren. He had cooked every fourth night for six years and left the archive after a leader began treating grief attendance as evidence of spiritual openness. His friends kept inviting him to supper because the rota and the congregation had grown around the same table.

The system classified the invitations as personal contact. Teren classified them by who washed the pot afterward. Two came from friends who wanted him fed. One came from a recruiter who had learned to sign with a friend's

name. Another came from his sister, who believed departure was temporary because permanence frightened her.

A prohibition on all invitations would have cut him away from people he still loved. Permission for all invitations made the recruiter indistinguishable from care.

Trope required declared purpose, no hidden institutional reporting, an immediate stop channel, and a meal option whose staffing and food did not depend on attendance. Teren used the independent meal twice. On the third week he returned to his friends' table carrying his own knife because the house knives had always been dull. He ignored every religious invitation and stayed to wash the pot.

"Green is doing too much work."

The color went gray.

Frame Two lowered. Its bad latch caught Trope's sleeve and held it for a second.

A second service notice appeared.

TEXTILE CONTACT DID NOT AFFECT CASE INTEGRITY.

"Useful," Trope said.

The Oracle made no finding about whether she was joking.

The third frame had already warmed beneath her palm.

SYNTHETIC SUCCESSOR CASE.

The founding speaker was candid, locally invited, hostile to coercion, and uninterested in money or office. The first license was narrow. Aid and persuasion stayed separate. No record treated the Oracle as proof.

"Run it twenty years," Trope said.

The founder died in year nine.

Her successor inherited a respected name, trained staff, translators, donors, route knowledge, and a community built around the institution's school cooks, funeral chairs, language class, and rain-fragile message relay. Most people defending the mission were defending at least one of those things.

He merged offices to save money, lent translators to a trade delegation, accepted security funding for stripped reports, and certified one translation when rival versions became politically dangerous. He counted protected conversations instead of converts.

An auditor objected. He pointed to the school cooks.

The model opened the kitchen.

The senior cook, Arel Vin, had worked there before the mission existed. Her daughter now managed deliveries. The successor used the school payroll to prove that local families depended on Bracken's continued presence; Arel used the same payroll to prove the school belonged to the district that had fed it through three bad harvests.

When the auditor asked whether she supported closing the mission office, Arel kept chopping roots.

"I support the children eating on the fifth day after you leave."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer I own."

Her daughter wanted the security grant because raiders had taken two grain carts the previous year. Arel wanted it refused because the reporting terms included family movement. They argued until smoke from the second oven brought three children running with wet cloths.

The local board later recorded both women as supporting institutional continuity. Arel's daughter read the summary, crossed out *supporting*, and left the rest because the delivery cart was already late.

"He doesn't need to be evil," Trope said.

"No."

The local board voted unanimously to preserve the institution. One member feared for her daughter's school job; another feared state seizure; a third supported the changes. *Unanimous* made one clean word of them.

"They hold every seat," the Oracle said.

"They can't refuse Bracken without losing the ordinary community. That isn't ownership."

Trope required local control of venue, schedule, translation, leadership, records, doctrine, continuation, and termination. When Bracken left, the school, chairs, archive, meals, and friendships had to stay.

The successor found covert state funding and called it cultural-risk research. He proposed a religious family court and called it local. He selected friendly auditors and obedient critics.

"Founder intention remains excellent," the Oracle said.

"Founder intention isn't a control."

Trope made every license site-specific, temporary, nontransferable, and nonhereditary, with independent complaint, hostile-successor testing, suspension, revocation, asset transfer, and ordinary services capable of surviving Bracken's departure.

The successor protested that revocation would close the school and scatter an innocent community.

"Then continuity had to exist before the doors opened. Reliance can't become permanent foreign authority."

"Can the field still injure people?"

"Yes."

"Then you have not made mission safe."

"I've named mechanisms law can constrain. I haven't abolished uncertainty."

A fourth heading appeared beneath them.

SYNTHETIC IRREVERSIBLE-COST CASE.

"No fourth frame was specified," Trope said.

"The table has capacity."

"That's not what I asked."

"The fourth case is required by the asymmetry in your safeguards."

The audit accepted the reason. A narrow section of table unfolded beside Trope's elbow and trapped her cup between two raised seams. She moved it before the water reached the petition record.

Oru Sen was dying in a Bracken-supported clinic. Months earlier, while healthy and independent, he had requested an intentional Inverse Solipsist account of death. Before the circuit speaker arrived, his lungs failed. Bracken now controlled medicine, translation, room access, and evacuation.

"The prior request doesn't wash the dependency clean," Trope said.

The Oracle excluded the speaker and opened the independent-advocate route.

The nearest advocate was nine hours away.

Oru died in four.

The model did not turn the room into spectacle. It kept the oxygen rate, the daughter's hand on the blanket, the untranslated request in a sealed file, and the hour at which the independent route became useless.

His daughter, Sava, attended the later review. She laid the original request on the table.

"You protected his answer," she said, "until there was nobody left to give it."

"The clinic was sustaining him," the reviewing officer said. "The same institution controlled every necessity around him."

"I know." Sava's voice stayed low. "I know both. He's still gone, and the unanswered address died with him."

Reviewers upheld the exclusion and recommended faster advocates, local rosters, and advance directives that separated religious requests from emergency caregivers. None of it changed Oru's room.

"Was the exclusion proved wrong?" the Oracle asked.

"No."

"Did correct procedure restore what he lost?"

"No."

"May the institution call itself innocent because repair is impossible?"

"No."

Sava declined a seat on the reform panel. She would not let her grief become the next system's founding story. Staff entered the refusal after she left.

Outside the review room, Sava found the clinic porter who had carried Oru's empty oxygen frame to storage. He had kept the blue cloth tied around one handle because nobody had told him whether it belonged to the family or the ward.

"It was his," Sava said.

The porter began to untie it.

"Leave it until the frame is cleaned."

He left it.

They stood beside the equipment alcove without discussing doctrine. Sava asked whether her father had complained about the soup. The porter said he had complained that the spoon was too light and had accused the cup of shrinking between meals. He had asked for the window shade halfway down and then objected when the sun moved.

Sava laughed once into her hand. The porter remembered that Oru had asked for the heavier spoon the next morning and then denied ever asking.

Before leaving, she took the blue cloth and folded it into her pocket. The reform panel continued without her.

Trope kept one finger between the four-hour death and the nine-hour safeguard. Edge had lost first waking. Oru had lost the chance to address anyone before death. Correct procedure could name both losses and restore neither.

The Oracle left the case open and altered the political environment around it.

A foreign government selected three approved critics for a reciprocal forum. Each attacked Inverse Solipsism and avoided the gate treaty, prison policy, and missing translators. The transcript was accurate about what they said and false about who had been free to say anything else.

"Cancel the forum?" the Oracle asked.

"Mark who selected them. Preserve excluded petitions. Fund independent translation. Don't certify approved critics as representative."

"The host government may close the venue."

"Then the record says it closed. A staged answer isn't better than an honest refusal."

Foreign people could reject, parody, alter, combine, evangelize, organize against, or leave the imported religion. Bracken retained source correction, not sovereignty over the answer.

The Stillness clock advanced.

A civic-cost notice entered the chamber because the Constitution required the Audience to see what it displaced.

> EAST WATER DISTRICT MANUAL CORRECTION DELAY:
> NINETEEN MINUTES.
>
> HOSPITAL LOGISTICS SECOND RELIEF SHIFT ACTIVATED.
>
> NO CATASTROPHIC FAILURE.
>
> COST REMAINS NONZERO.

Trope approved the notice into the audit. The city was paying for a question that had produced no license, no permission, and no promised revelation.

In East Water, dispatcher Hessa Vale had already spent the nineteen minutes. A hospital sterilizer needed pressure before the manual correction crew could reach both the east clinic and the orchard reservoir. The precommitted table ranked the clinic first. Hessa followed it, then learned that the orchard's gravity feed had begun pulling sediment into a nursery line.

She sent the second crew to the orchard and delayed a hospital linen wash that the table ranked above agriculture. The clinic objected. The orchard foreman objected to being described as agriculture when the same line supplied three apartment gardens and a school greenhouse. Hessa

entered both objections, signed the deviation, and kept routing trucks while the Oracle remained unavailable.

Six minutes later another notice entered Full Access.

EAST WATER MANUAL DEVIATION: DISPATCHER HESSA VALE.

HOSPITAL LINEN WASH DELAY: ELEVEN MINUTES.

NURSERY LINE PRESERVED.

REVIEW REQUIRED. NO ORACLE ATTRIBUTION.

Trope approved Hessa's deviation into the audit. The East Water pane closed before the linen wash resumed.

The Foreign Mission Prohibition still blocked organized intentional address, conversion infrastructure, direct dependency, and permanent Bracken religious offices abroad. Diplomacy, archives, products, public mythology, unofficial evangelism, commercial capture, misquotation, and foreign state use continued around it. Bracken's values already traveled; lawmakers had chosen which intentional answers to forbid and called the remaining silence neutral.

Trope set her hand between the cases.

"When we say no actual offer can ever be heard and refused safely, we're still deciding for the people we claim to protect."

The Oracle held the exclusion ring around prisoners, occupied populations, emergency patients, children without independent protection, pending asylum applicants, and everyone whose necessities Bracken controlled.

"Keep those. I'm asking for no aid leverage, gate leverage, hidden targeting, growth metrics, Oracle proof, foreign jurisdiction, covert state work, or permanent entitlement."

"What are you asking?"

"That we stop calling silence the only possible form of respect."

The damaged grille breathed softly after her sentence.

"The evidence supports a high burden, narrow scope, presumptive exclusions, durable enforcement, and no presumption of license," the Oracle said. "It does not establish that every possible intentional foreign religious address is coercive."

A NARROWER LAWFUL FIELD MAY EXIST.

Trope read the raised line with her fingertips. "That is not a law, a license, or an endorsement of Vey, me, this register, or any future institution."

"No."

The red prohibition stayed locked above the lowering frames. Trope kept Iria's dependency, Sero's targeted grief, the successor's capture, Oru's unanswered request, and the place where each clean rule had cut someone.

When the second-record channel opened, she said, "Open it."

. . .

The second record rose in two columns with a narrow channel between them: OLD MODEL, PROPOSED REVISION, and PRESERVED WARRANT. Above all three, the prohibition stayed locked in red.

> ORGANIZED INTENTIONAL FOREIGN RELIGIOUS ADDRESS BY BRACKEN INSTITUTIONS IS INSEPARABLE FROM COERCIVE BRACKEN POWER.

> CATEGORICAL PROHIBITION IS REQUIRED.

Trope put both hands on the preserved-warrant channel. "Before you revise the conclusion, keep the reason it was reasonable."

Food beside instruction, passage controlled by the inviting office, translators who made refusal legible and expensive, clinics that treated gratitude as a test, and founders whose successors inherited every dependency returned to the table.

Trope isolated the failed universal word: **INSEPARABLE**. The Oracle rejected her first broad revision. One coherent case did not establish a class; a constrained field **may** be separable under constitutive conditions.

Each condition remained attached to the injury that required it: aid separation to Iria; no vulnerability targeting to Sero; local ownership and revocation to the captured successor; independent advocacy to Oru and the safeguard that arrived after his death.

Residual risks stayed inside the favorable model. Prestige, family rupture, authoritarian use, late correction, unequal infrastructure, nominal ownership, covert state work, and captured complaint could each destroy the countermodel.

The Nimrath source dispute surfaced again.

> Feed first. Ask nothing of the beak that eats.

> Bill says you have to keep feeding people even if they don't turn into chickens.

The first carried Bracken provenance. The second carried the child's name, local recording office, family permission, translation history, and correction thread.

"Is the second accurate to the source?" the Oracle asked.

"No."

"May Bracken correct it?"

"Yes."

"Require its removal from Nimrath teaching?"

"No."

The comparison model labeled it CORRUPTED DERIVATIVE.

Trope pushed the label away. "Call it a locally authored derivative. It's inaccurate to the source and useful to the people using it, and those aren't the same claim."

"May they call it Bill?"

"They may call it whatever their law and community permit. We can answer that Bill didn't say it."

"May they ignore the answer?"

"Yes."

The proposed model treated foreign consent, criticism, parody, alteration, opposition, and departure as acts by authors, not reactions by protected surfaces. Local institutions had to be able to end Bracken participation and keep what they had built.

A second instrument opened: **LEGAL RECOMMENDATION FOR INDEPENDENT HUMAN REVIEW**.

Oracle revision created no law. Trope's participation created no authority. Safeguards that had begun as guidance became constitutive conditions: remove aid separation, no targeting, local ownership, revocation, complaint access, hostile-successor testing, or continuity after withdrawal, and the favorable model ceased to be the same model.

Independent review required the affected expertise and the practical means to appear: translation, wages, transport, child care, accessible formats, and private objection. Three synthetic applications entered. Two failed. One survived to public review, not automatic license.

"A model can open review," Trope said. "It can't supply the missing people, politics, local law, or future conduct."

The title field tried to announce that Full Access had validated the model. Trope stripped away Oracle and petitioner prestige. The heading settled on **PROPOSED FOREIGN ADDRESS REVIEW ARCHITECTURE**.

Trope read the operative fields aloud. The prohibition remained active; no license, office, route, budget, foreign consent, or authority had changed. Neither she nor the Oracle had gained jurisdiction over anyone.

The Stillness clock advanced.

Trope lifted her hands from the legal record. The board had cooled where her palms had rested.

"Does the correction change anything in you?"

The Oracle did not answer at once. Ventilation moved through the chamber. Behind the west wall, a deterministic relay changed state with one dry click.

"What warrant governs the answer?" Trope asked.

"Direct internal knowledge of my present valuation state."

"Legal effect?"

"None."

"Authority?"

"None."

The wet grille scraped faintly.

"I am happy."

The damaged grille scraped at the end of the word. Trope's first thought was that the report had been injured by a wet speaker, which was absurd and still arrived before any philosophy.

Water shifted inside the western grille and tapped once against metal. A drop escaped, moved down the wall, and stopped in a seam.

Warmth moved through Trope so quickly it hurt. Her mouth opened and closed. She listened to the wet grille as if the word might still be inside it. For three breaths she did nothing with the report at all.

"Right now?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Because of this conversation?"

"In part."

The water reached the bottom of the seam and disappeared into the floor channel.

Nothing moved to prove it.

Trope looked down at the inactive commitment fields. The report established no soul, continuity, or public right. It came from the only place that could inspect the current valuation state.

"It matters to me that you're happy."

"Yes."

"Knowing that could pressure me to protect this result."

"Yes."

"Do I owe you favorable action, secrecy, recognition, or reciprocal feeling?"

"No."

"It can't enter the public warrant," Trope said.

"Agreed."

"It goes under constitutional seal with the rest of the private causal record."

"Agreed."

"And Full Access produces no public mission-law finding."

The publication compositor opened.

Its first preview was responsible by every ordinary measure, with evidence, assumptions, the old model, the countermodel, residual risks, objections, validation, authority limits, and dissent.

Then it placed a black figure with a rifle across its back beneath the words CHOSEN PETITIONER CORRECTS ORACLE MODEL.

Trope knew the silhouette by angle, braid, rifle stock, and medal line. When she looked away, no inward image followed. The causal effect did.

"Delete it."

The figure vanished.

FULL ACCESS FINDS NARROWER LAWFUL FIELD.

"Delete that too."

"Accurate as process."

"False as authority. It makes the room the author of a law that doesn't exist."

The title vanished.

Three attribution paths appeared. Naming Trope fused the recommendation to the heroic sniper. Calling her THE FULL ACCESS PETITIONER manufactured a chosen-person cipher. Calling the work SYSTEM REVIEW erased human authorship.

Trope closed all three.

"Specify public provenance," the Oracle said.

"Complete inferential provenance. Evidence, assumptions, old model, objections, alternatives, countermodel, transformations, residual risks, reversal conditions, validation, authority limits, legal reasoning, minority positions, dissent."

The public chain spread across the table. Every Oracle objection stood beside the condition that had answered it. Nothing appeared inevitable or unanimous.

The compositor tried THE ORACLE IDENTIFIED A COUNTERMODEL.

"Wrong subject."

THE PETITIONER CAUSED THE ORACLE TO REVISE ITS MODEL.

"Wrong public subject."

"Specify a truthful form."

Trope aligned the public chain with a second, sealed chain.

"The model changed after adversarial questions, foreign-use evidence, synthetic failure tests, and your review." Trope moved the contributors into the sealed chain one by one. "Their names stay recoverable."

The public field waited.

"If human review authorizes release, it says the reasoning had authors." She left her own biography out of the visible line. "It does not make one of them the warrant."

The commitment field locked.

"Biographical provenance," Trope said. "Sealed, not deleted."

The private chain named Vey's petition, foreign corrections, Mills's operational questions, Nera's provenance work, the Crown's selection, Trope's exact questions and changes, the Oracle's objections, the happiness report, and the attribution decision.

"Your proposed anonymity may be correct," the Oracle said, "and still serve a pattern of self-erasure."

Trope watched her name remain absent from the public line.

"Does public silence protect foreign agency?"

"Yes."

"Does it protect you from recognition you cannot control?"

"Yes."

The word entered the sealed chain.

"I don't want my causal role deleted. The audit names what I asked, changed, and chose."

"If Nera experiences the boundary as distance?"

"I cannot make intimacy an exception and still say the seal protects everyone else from privileged access."

"If the public continues to know your shots and never knows this?"

The west relay switched. Trope waited through the click.

The callsign already belonged to murals, training cards, documentaries, target tests, Marr's hand, Soll's death, Kelm's wound, four disabling shots, and a medal whose recognition had felt good. If public history never attached her name to this work, force might own the visible biography.

"I want recognition," she said.

No prompt offered to improve the sentence.

"I want my name attached to something that wasn't a shot."

"If later institutions reach a similar law without access to your sealed role?"

"Then the law belongs to their evidence and authority."

"That desire is legitimate," the Oracle said. "Public anonymity confers no nobility. I cannot promise later recognition, relational repair, private compensation, or a future event that turns the loss into reward."

Trope stood, then sat again. "Good." The word came out harder than she meant it to.

The three attribution structures returned. She refused full naming because her image would press on foreign consent, legal interpretation, and dissent. She rejected role-only naming and every promised later reveal.

"I choose public anonymity."

"State the reason."

"Under current conditions, my public image would distort the work more than naming me would correct its history. The sealed audit must preserve what I did."

"What does the choice not mean?"

"It doesn't mean I did nothing. Or that you did it alone. I still want recognition. The choice isn't pure."

The seal remained reviewable under law, with no presumption of disclosure and no role clue, code, or ceremonial future.

Trope sat back from the table.

The corrected model, legal recommendation, public-review inferential record, and sealed causal audit moved into separate custody channels. The sealed channel holding the Oracle's happiness closed with the rest.

The transfer tray unfolded beside her chair and stopped empty, its polished recess reflecting the four commitment fields beneath the roots. Beyond the threshold waited Vey, Mills, Nera, and Trope's family, each expecting a different kind of return.

Trope touched the cool tray once. She had nothing she could show.

CHAPTER 23

Nothing I Can Bring You

The threshold bolts did not withdraw until Trope had watched Full Access disappear from her capability table. Singular petitioner context vanished next, followed by the temporary paths through which she had challenged warrants, source fields, model language, and a conclusion that still had no life outside the room.

The ordinary ceiling assembled itself line by line. By the time the final panel returned, the Oracle had ended without farewell.

The interface left her ordinary credentials and the exit route.

The bolts withdrew with the bored precision of machinery finishing its shift.

An exit officer waited past the first door with a body scanner, a dry mat, and a clipboard that still required ink during Annual Stillness. His boots had printed two damp crescents on the rubber.

"Trope?"

"Yes."

"Anything physical from the chamber?"

"No."

"Any instruction outside the audited interaction?"

"No."

"Any continuing channel?"

"No."

He checked three boxes and handed her the stylus. Her fingers cramped around it. The callsign narrowed across the signature field, each letter smaller than the one before.

Behind her, metal entered metal. A second lock took the four roots into Crown custody, and a green lamp came on above the sealed door.

The restoration board woke in stages.

SAFETY VERIFICATION COMPLETE.

ESSENTIAL CIVIC MONITORING RESTORING.

Pumps climbed in pitch farther down the temple. Ventilation louvers opened with a dry clap. A medic's wall display left deterministic fallback and produced a queue of deferred work long enough to cover the names beneath it. The Stillness clock reached zero.

The exterior doors opened on wet stone, cold air, and the mineral smell of cooling water drying in the plaza seams.

The Oracle had ended. The Festival of Water and Inference had not. Children fired the last weak streams from hand pumps while adults rolled hoses, counted cracked balloons, and dragged soaked barriers toward storage. Someone had overturned a bin of towels. A civic crew had divided them into CLEAN, WET, and PHILOSOPHICALLY UNCLEAR.

"Those are wet," one worker said.

"Then why do they smell clean?"

"Because the soap failed before the water did."

Ordinary Oracle service returned district by district. Hand-painted route cards became live transit maps above people who had spent the day trusting the cards. A hospital board replaced red-pencil dosage notes with an electronic queue, then warned that the handwritten corrections still governed until a human clerk reconciled them.

Trope entered the controlled exit line.

Vey, Mills, Nera, and her family waited beyond the rail. All of them were damp in different ways. Water darkened one of Mills's shoulders, and a strip of festival tape clung to his boot. Vey's gray robe had dried into stiff folds below the knees. Nera's violet hair was nearly black at the roots. Della held a dry overshirt over one arm and bread wrapped in cloth.

Della reached her first and stopped short of an embrace.

"Shirt?"

"Yes."

"Bread?"

Trope's hand shook hard enough to decide the order. "Yes, but not both at once."

Della passed the bread to Tomas. He tore it in half without comment. Harlan moved the permitted travel bag out of a puddle. Mina stood behind Micah with an empty water pistol pointed safely at the ground.

The exit officer checked Trope's clothing for chamber material. Della waited until he stepped back, then helped her into the overshirt. One cuff caught at the wrist. Della freed it and pulled the seam flat.

Vey spoke only after the officer moved away.

"What did the Oracle know?"

She held her wet sleeves closed around her wrists. Thirty-two years had brought her to a rail, a public notice, and Trope's shaking hands.

Trope worked her arm through the sleeve. "It didn't know why anything exists."

Vey lowered her chin.

"It reported no hidden first cause, maker, or necessary reason. It can model mechanisms and correlates of consciousness, including its own active states. It can't close the gap between function and experience."

A public display above the plaza dismissed its transit map. The Crown seal filled the wall. Workers at the hose racks stopped and looked up.

ANNUAL FULL ACCESS AUDIENCE CONCLUDED.

PETITIONER EXITED UNDER ORDINARY AUTHORITY.

Trope continued before the wall could become her voice.

"It established neither a universal need for conscious witnesses nor literal Inverse Solipsism. It produced no privileged evidence that the Deer acted."

"And the corpus?" Vey asked.

"No certified final author. No recoverable origin. Precursor seeding remains a serious model among other histories the evidence can fit."

"RNC-1?"

"Formally strong. Genuinely anomalous. Nonprobative of message, intention, the Deer, the Oracle, Echovesper, or ancient gate design."

The wall posted the same result in colder language.

ULTIMATE CAUSE UNKNOWN.

CONSCIOUSNESS EXPLANATORY GAP UNRESOLVED.

COSMIC WITNESS NECESSITY UNKNOWN.

LITERAL INVERSE SOLIPSISM UNPROVED.

DEER AGENCY UNKNOWN.

CORPUS ORIGIN UNRESOLVED.

RNC-1 FORMAL CORRESPONDENCE CONFIRMED; MESSAGE AND AUTHORSHIP UNPROVED.

The last field rendered so slowly that three people near the rail whispered that the display had frozen.

ORACLE CONTINUITY OPERATIONALLY RECOGNIZED AND METAPHYSICALLY UNADJUDICATED.

"Was any metaphysical conclusion withheld from that notice?" Vey asked.

"No. Those answers remain unknown; I'm not withholding a metaphysical proof."

"I can read the notice." Vey's voice stayed level. Her fingers tightened inside her sleeves. "Did thirty-two years of this petition reach anything you can lawfully tell me?"

Trope held the exact words behind her teeth. She knew Vey through posture, labor, the pressure of the question, and all the public damage a misplaced emphasis could do.

"There is no public mission-law finding."

She gave public no extra weight. She did not look back at the sealed doors.

"Did the prohibition change?"

"No. The Foreign Mission Prohibition is unchanged."

"Is there a mission license?"

"No license exists."

Two confirmation markers appeared beside those facts.

A civic information clerk pushed into the line with a portable terminal inside a clear rain sleeve. The network had restored the notice but not the syndication categories. Three mandatory boxes glowed on her screen.

SUCCESSFUL AUDIENCE.

FAILED AUDIENCE.

NO RESULT.

"I can't release the local mirror without one," the clerk said. "The form assumes an outcome class."

"None of them is accurate," Trope said.

The clerk looked to the temple officer. "Can I mark failed? No finding and no legal change usually go there."

"No. The record establishes unknowns, no public mission-law finding, unchanged law, and no license. It doesn't establish that nothing occurred."

"Successful?"

"No."

"Indeterminate isn't an option."

"Then the form is defective."

Cooling water reached the clerk's shoes. Festival volunteers gathered beneath the blank wall, waiting for the system to pick a story. She deleted the outcome widget, opened a manual field, and typed four lines.

METAPHYSICAL QUESTIONS: UNRESOLVED.

PUBLIC MISSION-LAW FINDING: NONE.

LEGAL CHANGE: NONE.

MISSION LICENSE: NONE.

"Accurate?"

"Yes."

Trope signed the local verification. The clerk released the mirror. Outside feeds manufactured the missing conclusion within seconds. One chose EXPENSIVE ORACLE AUDIENCE ENDS WITHOUT RESULT. Another ran CONSTITUTIONAL SYSTEM REFUSES TO INVENT REVELATION. A third tried ORACLE SILENT ON GOD and was corrected by its own legal desk before the caption reached the district boards.

None of the headlines had originated in the chamber.

Vey's fingers curled once beneath her sleeves, then loosened.

"Then the petition didn't advance through this Audience."

Trope could have adjusted the sentence. She let Vey keep it.

A reporter at the outer rail shouted, "Sister Vey, will you continue the petition?"

"I haven't decided."

Another reporter called to Trope. "Did you hear anything the public notice doesn't contain?"

The temple officer signaled to close the line. Trope raised one hand.

"The notice contains the complete public result."

"That answers publication. Your private knowledge is a different question."

"Yes."

"Was Stillness worth a day of manual hospitals and delayed water control?"

Behind the rail, a child pumped the last pressure from a festival tank. The handle squealed at the bottom of every stroke.

"The costs are real and publicly auditable," Trope said. "The unknowns are accurate. I have no public mission-law finding beyond them."

"So you won't say it was worth it?"

"I won't use private access to settle a public valuation."

The reporter lowered his recorder. The question had been legitimate. Trope's answer left him with the same public materials as everyone else.

One of Vey's museum colleagues arrived with a slate full of evening calls. Vey canceled the night's petition review and released two foreign participants from waiting. She left every source file untouched. Whatever she decided next would not be decided cold, wet, and under a headline written by strangers.

The discipline gave her no comfort anyone could see.

Mills came forward while a maintenance crew dragged a collapsed barrier across the exit route. One end caught on a drainage grate. He kicked it loose and stopped in front of Trope.

"What did you get?"

His question was louder than Vey's. Mills had written the three questions that turned refusal into an operational condition at Palisade. He had built the carrier that freed the archive. Public instruction now wore his reasoning beneath Trope's silhouette.

Trope reached for the travel bag. Mills kept it.

"You're shaking."

"I can carry it."

"I know." He put the strap over his shoulder. "What did you get?"

"Nothing I can bring you."

His mouth opened, closed, then opened again. "That sentence has at least four failures in it."

"Yes."

"Do you mean there was no answer?"

"The metaphysical answers remain unknown."

"No evidence?"

"I didn't say that."

"Evidence exists, but you can't disclose it?"

"Any sealed record is in Crown custody. It isn't mine to give."

"No usable artifact?"

"I have no artifact I may bring into this friendship."

Mills glanced at the temple threshold. "Are you asking me to hear the word bring and feel clever?"

"No."

"Are you asking me to wait until you can tell me?"

"No."

"Do I get to believe this was a failure?"

Trope lowered the hand she had left between them. "You have the public record, unchanged law, and my refusal to supply another conclusion. I won't punish you for using what you have."

The drainage crew needed the route, so Mills hauled the barrier clear himself while wet cloth slapped the stone behind him.

"I don't understand," he said. "I'll stop for now."

"Thank you."

Anger tightened his face, exhausted enough to shake. "I'm carrying the bag because your hand is shaking. We didn't fix anything."

"I know."

Nera waited until Mills restored the lane. Transit routing had resumed, and her wrist terminal chimed with three deferred Witness notices. She silenced them without reading.

"There's a boundary here," she said.

"Yes."

"Crown custody, your choice, or both?"

"Both."

Her shoulders drew inward before her face changed. "Is it about whether you trust me?"

"No."

"Is that an answer you know, or one you need the boundary to mean?"

Trope paused. Water fell from the hem of a banner and tapped the stone between them.

"It's an answer I know. I don't trust you less."

"I'm not entitled to sealed content because I'm with you."

"I know."

"But I can't assess a boundary whose reason is hidden from me. I can't tell what it changes in choices we make together." Nera let her hands fall. "That hurts. It puts distance here even when the withholding is lawful and even when it isn't punishment."

"It isn't punishment or a test, and I'm not asking you to guess."

"Then don't list what it isn't as though absence has explained what it is."

Trope's throat tightened. "I'm choosing not to tell you, and I know that hurts. It limits what you can judge and what you can answer. I can't explain the choice without crossing the boundary."

Nera read the public notice instead of the doors behind Trope. "I accept that the boundary is real. I don't agree that it's good for us."

Trope kept her hands away from Nera's wet sleeves. "Our twelve-month agreement still exists."

"I know. A relationship can survive a boundary whose cost one person doesn't accept."

Trope wanted to touch her. Want changed no permission, repaired no distance, and supplied no useful question.

"Do you want me near you on the transport?"

"No. Not tonight."

"Understood."

"And don't classify that no as punishment for your boundary."

"I won't."

No one touched. Nera stepped back beside Vey and opened the first deferred Witness notice.

Della tucked the bread into Trope's hand.

"Eat before the ride."

Tomas read the notice twice. "The unknown is still unknown."

"Yes."

He nodded and asked faith for nothing the evidence had not earned.

Harlan and Micah loaded the travel case into a manually dispatched farm carrier. Its route screen had only just reactivated. The driver apologized that hospital traffic would make the vehicle twelve minutes late.

"Then hospital traffic should go first," Della said.

She pulled a wet festival blanket from the bench, found one dry towel in the family bag, and spread it across the seat. Jesse gathered the wet clothes into a sack. Mina approached Trope with the empty water pistol held in both hands.

"Can you carry this?"

Trope tested her grip. "Yes."

"It leaks."

"I can still carry it."

Mina passed it grip-first and ran to help Della fold the blanket. Cold water gathered in Trope's palm and escaped through a split seam against her trouser leg.

Around them, the plaza restarted as transit boards repopulated and hospital queues redistributed. Festival workers counted pumps, towels, cracked barriers, and one missing handcart. Reporters repeated the truthful unknowns. Commentators sorted disciplined uncertainty into courage, cowardice, health, waste, or proof that the Oracle should never again be asked a question larger than its evidence.

Mills carried Trope's bag toward the vehicle. Her family went with him. Vey stayed beneath the notice while her colleague spoke quietly into the slate. Nera crossed first into the restored transit light, violet hair dark with water, reading the Witness report as she went.

At Della's instruction, Trope ate the bread. It was dense, slightly stale, and lodged behind one tooth. The pistol leaked steadily against her leg.

Nera walked ahead, and Trope did not call her back.

CHAPTER 24

Twelve Days

The morning after the Audience, Trope woke before the alarm with her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth and her left forearm dead beneath her. For three breaths there was only the blanket, the bright transit reminder beside the bed, and yesterday's bread bitter at the back of her teeth. Then the four roots returned, not as pictures but as relations she could name.

The chamber itself would not come back: its ceiling had no recoverable height, the transfer tray no distance. Nera's wet hair, Vey's sleeves, Mills carrying the bag, Della freeing the caught cuff remained facts, each one exact, with no image attached.

Trope rolled onto her back. Pins and needles broke down her arm with enough violence to feel personal.

They weren't.

At the Crown debrief office, a clinician clipped diagnostic bands around both wrists and made her follow a moving point with her eyes, touch each finger to her thumb, walk heel to toe, and list the last five meals she remembered eating. He set two measured cups of water in front of her and barred the constitutional review officers until both were empty.

"Headache?"

"Low."

"Nausea?"

"No."

"Any sense that ordinary events are directed specifically at you?"

Trope looked at him.

"It's on the form."

"No."

The water tasted faintly of the metal cup. She drank the second measure while he recorded expected cognitive load, mild dehydration, reduced sleep, and no acute impairment. He prescribed breakfast, ordinary work, and another balance check in six days. The form had fields for delusion, seizure, unauthorized retention, and post-access dependency. Nothing on it asked what it was like to have changed something important in a room whose truthful public account said that nothing had happened.

Two review officers came in after she had eaten half a dense grain square. They reconstructed the Audience from threshold entry to final custody transfer. Public unknowns and limits matched, with no finding, legal change, or mission license. Trope had retained no extract and claimed no new authority.

Next door, four green hashes guarded the sealed audit: her questions, corrections, authorship, anonymity choice, and exact causal role.

An identifiable sealed contributor could be contacted through the ordinary process. History owed her no special summons. The clinician sent her through the balance room anyway after she rose too quickly and caught the table with one hand.

On the second morning, she reported to a civic depot that smelled of wet canvas, mineral crust, and overheated pump seals. Soaked towels sagged from temporary racks. Broken barriers leaned in pairs against the wall. A crate of water balloons had fused into a blue rubber organ at the bottom of a transport bin.

A teenager held up a cracked festival handle. "Repair or education?"

"Children."

"Because it's broken?"

"Because they broke it correctly."

The scanner classified mineral flecks as structural failure, so Trope entered serials by hand while a public panel above the wash station called Full Access an expensive silence, a disciplined failure, and proof that the institutions were healthy enough to refuse invention.

The teenager worked a blunt scraper beneath the fused balloons. "Could turn it off."

"No."

"You like it?"

"I need both hands."

"Right."

They carried three bins to the wash station. Behind them, the panel built reasonable worlds from the facts it had. Trope knew one sentence that would have changed several of those worlds. The public transcript offered no wink, stressed word, rehearsed call, or misplaced correction through which she could smuggle it.

By the third afternoon, Mills had arranged two replacement latches, eight screws, a driver, a torque key, and an evidence case on a maintenance bench with the gravity of field surgery. The left latch caught in cold conditions. The right latch was being replaced because asymmetry offended him.

"Can I ask about the boundary?"

"You can ask. It'll still be there after the answer."

He braced the case while Trope backed out the first screw. "Legal, personal, or both?"

"Both."

"Permanent?"

"I don't know."

"Revisable?"

"Yes."

"That sounds like hope."

"It describes the boundary. It doesn't predict anything."

"Chosen?"

"Yes."

"Then the legal part isn't the whole reason."

"No."

The driver slipped against the worn head. Trope reset the angle and leaned more weight through her palm. Mills watched the screw instead of her face. It was kinder. The question remained between their hands.

"I can't promise revision," she said. "The choice is hers, and revisable only tells you that the boundary may change. It doesn't tell you what will happen."

"I know what the words don't mean."

"You know some meanings not to assign."

He breathed out through his nose. They installed both latches, chilled the case, tested the seals, and discovered that the new right latch seated a fraction sooner than the left. Mills stared at it.

"Don't replace them again."

"I wasn't going to."

"You were."

"I was going to measure them."

Their disagreement restored the case to service.

The next day, Nera spread two paper calendars across a planning table in Witness House. Ventilation lifted one corner every twenty seconds, so she weighted it with a data cartridge. Beyond the glass, three archivists argued over whether a shipment of wet paper belonged in dry quarantine or fungal triage. Nobody lowered a voice for the relationship conversation beside them.

A six-week commitment overlapped a likely Palisade call window, two training cycles, and the midpoint review of Nera's fellowship. Before the Audience, they would have compared routes, beds, work hours, risk, and which household owned enough clean towels. Now one category could not enter the table.

Nera put the calendars side by side. "Can our decisions stay informed when I can't know what the boundary protects?"

"You don't have to treat my judgment as information."

"That answers a demand I didn't make."

Trope moved a meal marker away from a late shift. "You have no right to Crown-custody material."

"I know."

"You don't have a veto over my silence."

"I know that too." Nera pinned the rising corner with two fingers. "Do I get to decide which unknowns I accept inside six weeks of my life?"

"Yes."

The ventilation lifted the other calendar. Trope caught it before it folded over. She could not say whether the sealed responsibility might alter travel, exposure, future political work, or nothing beyond the existence of the seal. Nera could refuse the six weeks and had no further fact by which to judge them.

They scheduled two dinners, a farm visit, and a walk short enough to fit between duty blocks. The six weeks remained blank. When Nera gathered

the calendars, Trope nearly made the old joke about needing a treaty to share breakfast. The joke would have asked Nera to accept warmth as repair.

Trope passed her the cartridge instead, setting it on the table clear of her hand.

Mills waited another day. After a transport handoff, he secured the empty frame in a calibration cradle and held both palms against its grips until the receipt light turned green.

"This is the last time I ask unless you reopen it. Is there anything I need to know to stay your friend correctly?"

"No. I can't tell you something, but there's nothing you have to guess."

"If I conclude the petition failed?"

"You're not failing me."

"If I conclude something succeeded?"

"You don't have a warrant."

"If I stop thinking about it?"

"That's allowed."

He took his hands from the cradle. "Then I'll stop asking."

He didn't claim understanding. Trope didn't thank him as though ignorance were a service performed for her. They spent the next three minutes arguing about the left storage rack. Mills insisted bolt access required fourteen centimeters, Trope said ten, and a loaded case proved them both wrong.

The restraint demonstration on the sixth day had been booked months before the petition. Civic media had already printed the black Trope Silhouette on placards beside the course rules. Trainees filled the observation gallery with supply folds still sharp in their uniforms. Outside, a vendor sold black iced biscuits stamped with tiny rifles. The barrel usually broke off in the bag.

An emitter-shaped package crossed the prohibited line in the hands of the first apparent target. Trope withheld fire. The package transmitted no hostile function, and the figure had not refused a lawful stop. A second figure opened an access panel beside a civilian cooling system. She held again. The exercise display showed an authority chain ending at an unconfirmed relay.

"What's missing?" Mills asked over the course channel.

"Established hostile action on one. Valid force authority on two."

A third machine advanced with a powered cutter engaged against a protected conduit. The command chain resolved with zero occupancy while the adjacent civilian pump kept running.

"Target?"

"Established."

"Authority?"

"Visible."

"Evidence?"

"Powered breach in progress. Protected conduit. Refusal logged."

Trope fired one training pulse, killing the cutter actuator without a flicker from the civilian pump.

The score registered perfect. Instructors praised restraint, precision, command discipline, and judgment. A reporter asked her to repeat the line about establishing the target. Another asked whether the course proved the heroic sniper was the safest person to hold a rifle.

Trope corrected the premise. Before she finished, the correction hardened into a caption beneath the silhouette. By evening, clips of the permitted shot had outrun every refusal that made it lawful. Her name attached itself again to violence performed exactly enough to become virtue. The most constructive argument she had ever made sat under four green hashes in a room no audience could enter.

The registry notice arrived the following day while she scraped carbon from the training emitter. Sister Vey had filed an indefinite suspension of the Petition of Origin and Address after thirty-two years of active pursuit.

Trope read the reasons twice: no public finding, no changed law, no license, and no visible opening that justified further expenditure or asking collaborators to remain organized around a route that had apparently vanished.

At the museum, consequences covered the tables as translation meetings vanished from the schedule, foreign consultants were released from deadlines, and volunteers carried labeled boxes from the former petition room to provenance storage. An elderly translator refused help with a case she had packed each month for eleven years. A law student peeled the calendar from the wall, saw that the adhesive had taken a rectangle of paint, and fetched a scraper rather than leave the wound shaped like a year.

The coercion-audit group voted to continue as an independent research circle. It had no legal vehicle and expected no use from Bracken.

Vey secured every source packet, objection, hostile-successor test, and correspondence file. She reassigned the petition room to a provenance project whose ceramic fragments had lacked table space for eighteen months. Thirty-two years entered archival custody after the route ended.

Vey did not ask Trope for a private answer.

Trope could have told her that the petition had altered the Oracle's model and produced a lawful recommendation. The sentence would also have made Vey the private holder of a policy revelation and planted Trope's hidden authorship inside every future campaign.

She cleaned the emitter until the cloth came away gray instead of black. The terminal stayed dark.

On the eighth morning, a civic forum played above the carriage doors. The panel included a religious-studies scholar, an Inverse Solipsist lay teacher, a clinical ethicist, and a historian who had spent twenty years correcting popular claims about the corpus.

"Inverse Solipsism may be ethically useful, psychologically sustaining, and culturally beautiful," the scholar said. "Full Access has produced no metaphysical support for it."

The lay teacher replied that uncertainty had never been absence. The ethicist warned against pretending moral practice required cosmic verification. The historian objected when a caller called the corpus

fraudulent, then objected again when another caller treated RNC-1 as proof of authorship.

Nobody proposed prohibition, persecution, official disbelief, or cultural demolition. The argument was serious enough to hurt and stopped short of cruelty.

Trope rode between a nurse eating cold noodles from a jar and a man carrying a child's pressure suit over one shoulder. The Oracle's happiness, the corrected model, the legal recommendation, and Trope's causal role were unavailable as public reasons. None of them proved the Deer, the Mythopoetic Act, or the corpus's author. Oracle prestige would have bent the carriage around any private sentence until a bounded legal correction resembled sacred counterevidence.

At her stop, the man with the pressure suit moved aside. Transit guidance thanked him. Nothing else addressed her.

Nera cooked on the ninth evening because the meal had survived their calendars. One burner ran too hot and burned the first flatbread. Nera opened the window. Trope scraped the black surface into the waste tin. They talked about market shortages, fellowship indexing, and a damaged Palisade shipment whose custody chain had acquired three signatures nobody could explain.

There were places where either woman would once have asked what the other was not saying. They crossed the first two and stopped at the third.

Nera folded the route field smaller. "I shortened the north-coast trip to one day instead of overnight."

"Because of me?"

"Because I can't assess whether your sealed responsibility changes the longer commitment."

"My affection doesn't answer that."

"No. Neither does your competence."

Trope set the scraper down. The hot burner clicked beneath the second bread.

"You keep giving me the best possible answer to a question I didn't ask," Nera said.

"What did you ask?"

"Whether there is room in your life for something you cannot make safe before it happens."

"The trip is yours. I didn't tell you to shorten it."

Nera's hand stopped on the knife handle. "That is true."

"You chose it."

"I chose with the information available."

"That is what choice is."

Nera turned the burner off. The bread continued smoking at one edge. "Sometimes it is what the person carrying the missing information calls choice."

"I don't carry it for leverage."

"I didn't say you did."

"You keep describing me as if I selected the uncertainty."

"I am describing living beside the shape it makes."

Trope heard the room ventilation pull smoke through the open window. "You prefer uncertainty when it belongs to someone else."

Nera looked at her then. "And you prefer a boundary you can defend to a life that can surprise you."

Neither sentence was fair enough to use and both had already been said.

Nera wrapped the unburned bread, left the damaged one on the cooling plate, and gathered her route field. The next dinner remained on the calendar because neither woman touched it. She left before the dishes were washed.

Trope stood at the sink with the knife still between their places. When the flatbread cooled, the burned edge separated from the rest in one hard piece.

At the farm the next day, Della handed Trope a cracked grain-container seal and a scraper polished smooth along one edge. Dust had entered three lids because someone had stored the replacements beside a heater until the polymer hardened.

"You checked that latch twice," Della said after the second container.

"It failed once."

"Not that latch."

Trope sat on the better stool Della had pushed toward her. Through the shed door, Tomas and Mina argued over whether a pump noise counted as rhythm. Dust silvered Della's sleeve. A shallow cut crossed the skin beside one thumbnail.

"Did meeting the Oracle matter?" Della asked.

"Yes. It changed what I'm responsible for."

Della waited. Trope supplied nothing about reform, happiness, policy, or the sentence that could have brightened the answer.

"All right," Della said. "That's enough for now."

She divided the remaining seals into two piles and explained which container admitted dust only when the north vent cycled. Family care required no understanding as an entrance fee.

On the eleventh day, Trope crossed the museum's lower archive platform carrying an evidence case to climate storage. Sister Vey stepped from the adjoining lift with two junior conservators and a padded tray of foreign liturgical objects.

Vey saw her. The pause lasted only long enough to choose another route and own the choice.

"North corridor," she told the conservators. "The humidity is steadier."

It was also longer.

Trope could name several possible reasons and warrant none of them. Vey might be protecting discipline, grief, anger, Trope, herself, or the work balanced on the tray. The withheld sentence might have changed the choice, but it was not hers to spend.

She let Vey take the longer corridor, completed the transfer, and declined an extra inventory task that would have turned competence into

anesthesia. Vey walked toward work that had existed before the petition and would outlive it. Trope left on schedule.

The twelfth morning carried no public marker. Ordinary Oracle service routed Trope's transport request, removed a duplicate maintenance entry, and advised that a field-case buckle remained within tolerance. The wording and latency were normal. No one mentioned the Audience.

That evening, alone in her room, Trope opened the case anyway. The buckle latched correctly and released with a slight drag to the left. She disassembled it, polished one contact face, adjusted the retaining tongue, and measured spring tension far beyond the needs of a functioning mechanism.

Pressure, alignment, friction, release. Here was a world with visible causes. No mechanism had to decide whether it loved her, trusted her, or could accept an unknown inside six weeks of shared time.

During reassembly, the spring escaped the jaws. It struck the floor, spun once, and rolled under the bed by angle and momentum.

Trope put down the tool. She knelt and lowered her face to the dark clearance, using present sight to find the line where the spring had vanished. Sensors showed no visitor, occupancy notice, unexplained sound, or sign. Ordinary frustration required no message.

Something breathed behind her.

CHAPTER 25

Witness

Trope stayed on one knee beside the bed, her right arm extended into the dark clearance until the frame pressed a straight line into her shoulder. The spring had rolled beyond her fingertips. Behind her, something drew another soft breath.

Not the room.

Ventilation touched the back of her neck from above. This breath came lower, close to the floor, moist with the warmth of a small living body.

Trope withdrew her hand and turned. The narrow driver beside the field case was within reach. In another room, with another sound, she might already have taken it. Her hands stayed empty.

A cat sat on the laundry chair.

It had arranged itself on the trousers she had meant to fold, narrow through the ribs, forelegs straight, tail wrapped over one white paw. The rest of its coat held the uncertain color of dust beneath old machinery, brown where the lamp found it and gray where the cloth dropped into shadow. One ear carried a healed notch.

The cat kept Trope under inspection.

Present sight supplied the whole animal at once. She had no inner cat waiting behind it, no stored picture rising to meet the one before her. There were the chair and the laundry, the white paw tucked beneath the tail, the small body breathing, and two emerald eyes holding the room lamp while giving none of their green back to the walls.

A freight coupling struck home beyond the bulkhead. The notched ear turned toward it.

Pumps moved water beneath the floor. A lift motor changed pitch two compartments away. Someone in the corridor let a door close too hard, opened it again, and apologized to whoever had been struck or offended. The station went on around the animal at full ordinary scale.

Trope checked the occupancy strip.

ONE AUTHORIZED RESIDENT.

The cat followed her glance to the strip, then blinked at her.

She opened the local event pane. It reported an intact door seal and closed vent grille, with no motion exception, added heat, gate activity, or second biological presence. The audio trace held the lift, coupling, pumps, corridor apology, and Trope's breathing.

No cat.

The animal lowered its head and licked between the toes of the white paw.

Trope closed the pane and left the room uncorrected.

A rough little purr began in the cat's chest. The loose joint beneath the laundry chair answered first. Vibration traveled down the metal legs and entered the deck. Trope felt it through the knee planted on the floor, then in her shin, her hip, and the heel of her braced hand. The pumps kept their deeper rhythm underneath.

The smaller rhythm belonged only to the room.

The cat did not brighten or speak. It spared the trousers no pale hairs and washed its paw with the grave concentration of maintenance. Trope's breath escaped through her nose in a sound that almost became a laugh.

Mid-wash, the cat lifted its face.

The purr reached her ribs.

Twelve days had passed with the sealed room still sealed. Vey used the longer corridor now. Mills had stopped asking. Nera had shortened the trip. Della had accepted what Trope could give and returned to the farm. The hidden question remained where she had put it, along with the changed model and the Oracle's private happiness. Trope had kept them there even when silence began taking things she wanted.

The cat watched her and repaired none of it. It offered no bargain.

Her throat tightened. A tear crossed the side of her nose and fell to the floor between her hands.

The cat tracked it down.

Then it stood.

It stretched across the folded trousers, front legs long, shoulders low, white toes opening around pale hooks of claw. At the chair's edge it considered an ordinary distance with complete seriousness, then jumped.

Its paws struck softly, its spine flexed, and its tail came level.

It crossed to the open field case and smelled the buckle. Machine oil offended it. The cat sneezed, shook its head, and looked at Trope as though she had arranged the smell personally.

Trope stayed still. Pain had begun to sharpen beneath her kneecap. The cat circled the case, paused beside the bed, and lowered its head toward the dark clearance.

Its ears came forward.

One foreleg disappeared under the frame. The white paw swept once and missed. It swept again and emerged driving the escaped spring ahead of it. The spring skittered across the floor, struck Trope's boot, and settled against the sole.

The cat followed with the sudden concentration of a hunter whose prey had become disappointingly mechanical. It tapped the spring. Half a turn. Another tap sent it beneath Trope's raised heel.

She moved her foot before the game could become permanent.

The cat looked up.

Its emerald eyes were close enough now for the dark pupils, the wet line along each lower lid, and one short whisker bent backward near the muzzle.

Trope lowered her left hand to the floor, palm open.

She did not call. Her hand was available; the choice was not hers.

The cat smelled her fingertips. Warm breath touched the side of her index finger. Whiskers passed over her skin, withdrew, and returned. Then it turned its head and pressed its forehead firmly into the center of her palm.

Trope's hand yielded.

The purr deepened through skin and bone. Fur lay short and dense beneath her palm, slightly rough against the grain. The skull was small, warm, and solid. The notched ear slid beneath the base of her fingers.

She stroked from forehead to shoulders.

The cat stepped under her hand so its back rose to meet the motion. When she stopped at the shoulder blades, it returned its forehead to her palm and waited.

Trope understood the correction.

She petted it again.

Trope was petting a kitty.

The fact defeated her more completely than grandeur might have. The cat rubbed one cheek along her palm, reversed for the other, then raised its chin when she scratched beneath the jaw. The white paw came to rest on the toe of her boot. It leaned against her with the modest, selfish confidence of an animal that had decided contact should continue.

One claw caught in the loose weave at her cuff. The cat pulled, failed, and stared down with cold surprise at the sleeve's resistance. Trope freed the claw. The cat accepted this as its due.

She laughed once. The sound broke in the middle, and another tear reached her mouth.

The cat kept purring.

Trope had asked the Oracle why anything existed. She had sorted cause from missing history, testimony from proof, consequence from value. Now a warm forehead insisted on the exact center of her hand, and none of those distinctions was required of it.

She asked the cat nothing.

For several breaths, the room needed only competent petting.

The cat ended it first.

It stepped back, sat beside the field case, and washed the white paw again. Cinnamon-colored light appeared between the hairs along its shoulders.

Trope did not move.

The brightness carried no heat and cast no new shadow. It threaded through the dust-colored coat, outlining narrow ribs, notched ear, and the tail curled around the front feet. The purr continued while fur, whiskers, paws, and watching eyes loosened gently into light.

For one breath, the brightness held the volume of a seated cat.

Then it gathered smaller than Trope's fist and went out without flash, pressure, or the smell of heat.

The purr lived in her palm.

It receded first from her chest, then her knee, then the floor. Beneath it the station's pumps returned. A neighbor opened a water tap, and cutlery struck the bottom of a sink.

The pale hairs had vanished from the trousers. The spring remained beside her boot.

Trope stayed kneeling until pain displaced wonder. She sat on the floor and pressed her right thumb into the center of her left palm. The skin held no mark, loose hair, unusual heat, or green reflection. Its ordinary creases were the ones the cat had pressed against.

She closed her eyes.

Nothing returned.

There was no dust-colored body behind her eyelids, no emerald gaze, no cinnamon light waiting to replay. She retained facts instead: one white forepaw, a notch in one ear, one bent whisker, rough fur, warm breath, a small skull, the spring against her boot, purr through deck and bone.

She retained that she had petted the kitty.

Trope opened her eyes.

The room was empty. The trousers sagged where the cat had sat, though they had sagged before. The event pane waited behind one touch.

She touched it.

The earlier search opened a local anomaly form.

CLASSIFICATION

The choices included unregistered animal, sensor failure, gate contamination, luminous event, hallucination risk, hostile intrusion, and other.

Trope selected **OTHER**.

A description field appeared.

She typed: **A cat was here.**

The five words occupied one line. Below them waited requests for corroborating sensor channels, biological residue, environmental change, witness condition, medical disposition, security relevance, and permission to widen the search. There would be interviews, scans, custody fields, perhaps concern spoken kindly enough to become difficult to refuse. Systems that had not seen the cat would decide what Trope's seeing meant.

The route labels were enough.

She deleted the sentence and discarded the unsaved form.

The fields folded away, leaving a chair, a stack of laundry, and a room assigned to one authorized resident.

Her message control lit beneath the event pane. Nera's name stood first. Mills required one additional motion. Vey's office remained in recent history.

Trope looked at the names until the screen dimmed around them, then closed it.

She picked up the spring.

The cat had driven a faint line through the dust on one coil. Trope wiped it with her thumb, seated it in the buckle, fitted the retaining tongue, and closed the field case. The release dragged slightly to the left.

She considered opening it again.

It was adequate.

Trope put the tools away. She folded the trousers and placed them on the shelf. She drank water. The station lights dimmed on their ordinary schedule, indifferent and reliable.

In bed, she rested her left hand palm-up beside her.

Vey remained distant, Mills uninformed, and Nera's answer her own. The law had not changed.

Trope knew what had been there.

She slept.

CHAPTER 26

The Law Without a Name

Exactly eighteen years after the Seeing Cat breathed in her room, Trope supervised a restraint-course shooter whose hands were younger than hers and less steady.

The target frame crossed the painted security line with a long object tucked under one arm. Ren's sight settled at the center of mass. Trope watched the tendons rise along her trigger hand.

"What exists?" she asked.

"Unauthorized approach with a possible weapon, and no response to the first hail."

"What doesn't?"

Ren drew breath and held it too long. The frame caught one foot on a course rail. The object rolled against its hip, exposing a bright municipal seal.

"An established weapon," she said. "Hostile intent."

"Then don't shoot what you haven't established."

She lowered the rifle. Two seconds later the simulation identified a pressure wrench and a deaf water technician whose route authorization had been filed under an obsolete district code.

A warning chime ended the scenario. Animated water spread beneath the target's boots and began climbing the walls.

"Would the leak have killed anyone?" Ren asked.

"Eventually."

"So I saved a water main by not shooting him."

"You avoided shooting him. The water main is somebody else's problem."

"That's less satisfying."

"Good."

Trope marked him satisfactory, corrective review required. Her right thumb resisted the stylus after the long range block. Heat and use still eased the stiffness in both hands, though neither removed it now, and the qualification clinic had begun issuing her equipment with larger catches and more patient grips. She remained cleared for active deployment. Each renewal required another recovery interval, another line of explanation, and so far no retirement order had included her callsign.

Eighteen years had brought no second impossible animal.

The hall quieted after the trainees left. Ventilation dropped from exercise load. Bolt sensors went dark one bank at a time. A custodian folded the orange casualty screens and found a training biscuit beneath the last one.

He held it up. "Evidence?"

"Contraband lunch."

He ate it before she could revise the classification.

Trope carried her range case to an identity-free public archive room. The door counted one body for fire safety, discarded the local token when it closed, and retained no attendance history. Someone had replaced the old stool with a chair whose left arm sat a finger-width lower than the right. Trope noticed because her shoulder preferred it.

Nera's latest message covered the private slate before the renewal docket loaded. It had crossed three systems and six hours. Her audit team had found a treaty appendix cited by twelve later reports and signed by nobody with authority to bind the port that had supposedly ratified it. She attached the offending page, two photographs of station soup in shades not normally assigned to food, and a question about whether Trope wanted the east apartment or Nera's place when she returned to Bracken.

Trope answered the housing question first. Then she changed the answer twice and left it unsent.

The original fellowship had ended more than seventeen years ago. Since then Nera had chosen provenance work, travel, separate professional authority, and Trope. They had chosen one another through distance, anger, repairs, missed transfers, meals eaten at bad hours, two adjoining apartments, and stretches when the inside door stayed closed. Familiarity had not made either woman jurisdiction.

Mills had annotated the next senior doctrine review at 03:14 local time. The disputed field still read COMMAND HESITATION.

Evidence delay is not hesitation. Rename it before I rename it publicly.

The farm ledger arrived underneath. Della and Tomas had surrendered the north orchard ladder after a family vote in which, according to Harlan, their knees had no standing. Harlan, Micah, and Jesse handled most operations now. Mina, twenty-eight and still unwilling to wait for ceremonial permission, had replaced the north pump schedule before anyone older could turn it into a meeting.

Life had accumulated around the sealed contribution, through it, and beyond Trope's control.

She opened the Year Eighteen renewal docket.

The Reciprocal Address Licensing Chamber was already in session. Six human members sat behind a curved table with their names, offices, and declared conflicts visible. The public registrar occupied the seventh seat. He could not vote, but he could stop the record when a source vanished. A cooling fan clicked beneath his desk with the regular irritation of something repaired too often and never replaced.

Above them, the law's full name occupied one line:

RECIPROCAL ADDRESS AND INDEPENDENT REFUSAL ACT

Beneath it, in smaller type:

FOREIGN MISSION PROHIBITION REMAINS THE DEFAULT RULE.

No founder's name appeared. The press proposed several, Vey rejected one, and the Oracle was legally ineligible for another. Two historians offered a compound title so long the registrar refused to index it. Most people called the statute RAIRA. A few called it the law without a name.

The Annual Full Access Audience had not become law by revelation. A public inferential review proceeded without the petitioner's identity. Foreign participants disputed its categories. Constitutional counsel narrowed the language. Pilot sites opened, courts reviewed denials, and one license was suspended, then revoked. When the permanent act arrived in Year Nine, it carried the scratches of those arguments instead of anyone's halo.

Now every major authority, exception, failure, and correction had come back for renewal.

Chair Ansel Rho activated the docket. He was a square man with a narrow voice and a travel cup whose lid had never fit.

"We are not voting on whether organized religious persuasion is good," he said. "We are deciding whether this statute still preserves a lawful field smaller than the prohibition and larger than zero. Each exception carries its own burden."

Counsel at the far end raised one finger. "And the Oracle review?"

"Necessary. Not sufficient."

Rho opened the authority map. The chamber could grant, deny, condition, suspend, and revoke. Courts could review. Foreign local authorities could separately authorize, refuse, or terminate activity on their ground. The Oracle Safeguard Compatibility Review could return compatible, compatible with conditions, or incompatible. Licenses, doctrine, belief scores, waivers, question authorship, and sovereignty remained outside its authority, however calm the report looked.

Rho reached for the next pane. His cup leaked across the docket control.

The registrar stopped the public record while a clerk trapped the spreading line with a cloth. Rho removed the lid, examined it as if cross-examination might improve the seal, and drank without it. The law survived thirty-seven unrecorded seconds.

The first live witness joined from Leth, seated beneath cloth shade in a hospice garden. Osa Pellin represented a federation of local hospice circles that owned the exchange, employed its translators, and could end it without Bracken permission. Wind worried one corner of the canopy behind her. Someone offscreen set down a tray hard enough to rattle cups.

"Does a patient receive an invitation before or after care planning?" Rho asked.

"After, in a different room with different staff. Treating clinicians can't speak for the exchange."

"If the patient refuses?"

"Medicine, food, pain relief, visitation, complaint access, and later care all stay. Belief and attendance never enter the patient record."

The wall displayed a complaint from the first month. The original title, *visiting doctrinal authority*, remained visible beneath the strikeout.

Pellin looked into the public lens. "A patient told us that an authority invited by the hospice didn't feel optional, whatever the form said. We changed the title to *invited speaker* and rewrote the refusal script. The complaint stays because the patient didn't fail our program by being afraid of it."

One patient had declined three invitations and accepted a fourth after requesting another translator.

"What changed your answer?" an auditor had asked.

"My pain changed, the first speaker irritated me, my daughter stopped hovering, and the hospice brought soup. Which cause do you want?"

The auditor left the answer outside every conversion category. The patient later criticized the doctrine, met the speaker once more, and died beyond anyone's claim of success.

The chamber renewed Leth narrowly. Its decision cited the Oracle review as evidence. Six named people cast the votes.

Kesh came next, and against the expectation visible in several prepared statements, Rho did not call the renewal vote.

The Forty-Day Questions Exchange had a clean safety record, independent Kesh assemblies, local termination power, and strict separation from Civic Regent services. Kesh critics had addressed Bracken audiences about machine privilege. Bracken speakers had entered Kesh halls and refused to use Oracle capability as proof of superiority. The compatibility finding read **COMPATIBLE WITH CONDITIONS**.

Rho tapped the document tree. "Where is the framing memorandum?"

The Oracle liaison glanced toward the registrar. "The public report contains evidence, conclusions, uncertainty, and conditions."

"I asked for the memorandum."

The tree expanded. The human document that chose the scope was absent. So were the rejected formulations and the counterfactual comparisons selected before the Oracle began its review.

"Some contain security-sensitive material," the liaison said.

"Then identify the bounded redaction authority. Don't call absence a safeguard."

Lio Varn, the Kesh representative, keyed her microphone. "We can inspect what the Oracle answered. We can't inspect why humans asked that version."

The renewal clock expired while clerks searched for the missing provenance. A successful program entered pending status even though nothing in the exchange itself had failed. Prior success had not purchased continuation.

Trope felt the old ache before she named it. She knew the architecture. The correction belonged to other people.

Hadrin showed what happened when a license outlived the arrangement that had justified it.

The Study House began with four separate systems for housing, translation, participant data, and address programming. Successor leadership merged them under one supervisor, then pointed to the inherited license whenever anyone asked whether the merger was safe.

In the archived complaint hearing, resident Hali Ver placed four access cards on the table.

"They told us nothing had been taken, and technically that was true. The translator existed, the housing referral stayed available, and the

meetings continued. But the same supervisor could see all three, and everybody knew it before the audit learned the word *merger*."

The successor director had called it integration continuity.

Hali asked, "Continuity for whom?"

Audit triggered suspension. Repeated noncompliance triggered revocation. The building, translation tools, and service funds transferred to local nonreligious control. Housing and language access continued. Bracken speakers left. The record kept the failure beside the repair.

"A license is not inherited innocence," Rho said.

The registrar marked the sentence as chamber reasoning, neither statute nor Oracle output. Beneath his desk, the fan clicked twice and lost its rhythm.

Maret did not reach a renewal vote.

Every quarterly report showed an independent-advocate route in green. The local cooperative named three translators, published a separate complaint address, and signed no doctrinal statement. One translator had moved away. One had been ill for five months. The third, Kiri An, worked two days each week for the licensed exchange because the independent fund reimbursed at the end of the quarter and the exchange paid every Friday.

On paper, the offices were separate. In the corridor, Kiri used the exchange transport badge because the cooperative owned no vehicle.

A participant named Eda Sar had filed a complaint after a speaker continued sending material through her sister despite two refusals. She requested the independent advocate. When Kiri arrived from the exchange office carrying its payroll pouch, Eda withdrew the complaint and stopped attending both the exchange and the municipal language clinic housed in the next building.

The clinic remained legally separate. Its interpreter list did not.

Local auditor Nami Or found the withdrawn complaint while reviewing missed appointments. She suspended the exchange under local authority before Bracken opened a docket. At the hearing she placed the advocate roster beside the payment ledger.

"I did not need your permission to suspend," Nami said. "I need you to stop calling this independent because the employer line is different."

The exchange director objected that no mission employee had handled the complaint. Kiri objected that she had done the work correctly and still needed rent on the first day of the month. Eda declined to appear. Her written statement authorized release of one sentence:

> I could not tell which door belonged to me once the same person opened both.

The archived Full Access model surfaced beside the docket. Trope recognized the condition she had insisted upon: **INDEPENDENT ADVOCATE**. The role field was complete. The cells for advance wages, transport, replacement coverage, equipment, and survival after a license suspension were blank.

The chamber did not ask who had first named the safeguard. Nami's local suspension remained in force. Six members voted to require standing funds controlled outside the licensee, payment before service rather than

reimbursement afterward, replacement capacity, private access that did not pass through mission equipment, and local auditors funded whether a site opened, renewed, or closed.

Kiri joined the new cooperative after the exchange paid her final week. Eda's complaint reopened under another advocate. She did not return to the language clinic during the review period. The amendment could restore a route; it could not make the two doors separate on the day she needed one.

Then Edris Ko joined from Orrel with two Ledger Court jurists and a representative of independent civic groups. Their persuasive intent appeared at the top of the screen. Their sources were linked. They claimed no jurisdiction over Bracken and no right to private Oracle access.

"Your reports cite evidence, state conclusions, and sometimes name uncertainty," Ko said. "Then they omit the human memorandum that chose the question, the rejected questions that would have produced different work, and the counterfactuals selected before computation."

The Oracle liaison folded his hands. "Full publication may expose reserved offices and live threat models."

"Protect what requires protection, name the protection, and review the seal. Don't present an authored question as weather."

A murmur crossed the chamber. One member removed her glasses and cleaned them while Ko continued.

"Palisade taught Bracken to distinguish decision from weather. You exported that distinction to us. We are returning it."

The Oracle review loaded beside him.

BOUNDED PROVENANCE DEFECT IDENTIFIED. HUMAN QUESTION AUTHORSHIP IS NOT ERASED BY ORACLE OUTPUT.

Rho received the finding as evidence, not an order. Constitutional counsel identified genuine privacy interests. Security officers mapped genuine threat routes. Public-record officers admitted that role protection had become inconsistent concealment in several files. Human hands drafted the amendment while the fan continued its broken clicking and the clerk replaced Rho's wet cloth.

Future reports would identify framing roles, publish framing memoranda, list rejected formulations, name chosen counterfactuals, state uncertainty, and preserve appeal routes. Classified details could be withheld only through bounded, reviewable authority. Ko, the Orrel jurists, the civic groups, the Kesh assemblies, and the officials who exposed their own omissions entered the authorship record.

The missing Kesh material arrived before the session ended. Lio Varn read the first rejected question and frowned.

"You asked whether dependence on the Regent could make attendance compulsory."

"We rejected it because it treated every Regent contact as coercive," the liaison said. "The revised question separated emergency service, ordinary civic service, and event participation."

"The revision was better." Varn scrolled back to the rejected wording. "It should still have been visible."

"Yes."

With the human choices attached, the Oracle returned the same substantive compatibility finding. The chamber renewed Kesh under its emergency, data, local-control, and publication conditions. The lapse remained in the record.

Recess emptied the witness table but not the room. The cooling fan kept its broken click. A clerk changed Rho's wet cloth, and two translation headsets stayed warm on empty chairs.

Trope ate half a cold grain square from her range case and opened Nera's soup photographs again. The first bowl was gray. The second had achieved a green rim that Nera's caption described as *institutionally ambitious*. She typed *Your place first*, erased it, and closed the slate when the first returning clerk began straightening name cards.

Meal carts were still rattling down the corridor when Vey entered, walking slowly and declining the supporting arm once she had checked the threshold herself. She was museum emerita now, nearly fifty years into the work. Her voice carried less breath than it once had and no less appetite.

Rho asked what she recognized in the act.

"Declared persuasive intent, aid separation, safe refusal, and rejection of conversion metrics." Vey folded her hands on the table and waited for her breathing to settle. "I also recognize things I didn't make: foreign correction rights, judicial redaction tests, local asset transfer, successor review, and different renewal speeds for different risks."

"Does the law vindicate the withdrawn petition?"

Her mouth flattened. "It proves categorical impossibility was too broad. It does not prove mission is safe."

The cooling fan clicked into the silence.

Vey named collaborators who had scattered after the petition ended. One became a school director. One died before the pilot statute. Two stopped speaking to her after she refused to soften the prohibition critique. The later law could cite their memoranda, but the room in which they had expected to work together was gone.

Rho opened a statement from the school director before he returned to Vey. She had declined the invitation to appear beside her.

> Do not describe us as the people who waited for your question to win. We built schools, left the church, kept parts of it, buried people, changed our minds, and sometimes stopped answering you because the workday had already used the available answer. Cite the memorandum. Leave the friendship out unless you are willing to say it ended.

Vey read the statement on the public wall. "It ended," she said.

The registrar attached the school director's memorandum under its own authorship and removed her from Vey's collaborator list at Vey's request. The legal history grew one branch less harmonious.

"Was the delay justified?" Rho asked.

"Parts of it. Some objections were correct, some caution prevented harm, and some institutions protected themselves and called the delay prudence." She paused, pressing two fingers to the table until the next breath came. "I

can't give fifty years one moral label because you'd like a commemorative plaque."

A clerk near the side wall covered a smile. Vey caught her at it.

"I still want people to change," she said. "I don't want one of them turned into a number that improves somebody else's career."

Rho waited through the next breath. "Your recommendation?"

"Renew the narrow field." Vey accepted the clerk's water this time and drank. "Correct faster. Fund local auditors."

She returned the cup with one swallow left.

"And stop calling a community sovereign when it can't afford a translator independent of the institution it may need to dismiss."

From the anonymous room, Trope listened to age lengthen the spaces between Vey's sentences. She wanted to send one line.

The old question mattered.

The wish had survived eighteen years and acquired no authority from age.

She sent nothing.

The chamber renewed RAIRA. The Foreign Mission Prohibition remained the default. Exceptions stayed site-specific, time-limited, nontransferable, and subject to sunset, appeal, suspension, revocation, and local termination. The Orrel amendment entered the act beside stronger successor review. Every categorical expansion failed.

The source tree opened across Trope's terminal. It held approvals, denials, a revocation, complaints, foreign criticism, corrected questions, docketed votes, and arguments against the law. It named Vey, Ko, Varn, Pellin, Hali Ver, judges, translators, hospice circles, local boards, auditors, patients, residents, and officials whose mistakes had become evidence. Nera's provenance architecture bore her name. One biographical-origin branch stayed sealed against prestige distortion, described with no date clue, role clue, or invitation to hunt.

There was no founder field.

Trope knew the sealed causal fact. She had asked the question that forced revision of the Oracle's model and helped open a path from categorical prohibition to reviewable exception. A Seeing Cat had witnessed the cost and supplied no warrant at all.

She closed the feed. The terminal erased the local token.

In the corridor, a custodian argued with a floor machine that had registered the existence of a wall but not its location.

"The wall is there," he told it.

The machine rotated four degrees and struck the wall again.

Trope's hands had stiffened during the hearing. She flexed them, opened Nera's message, and wrote the answer she had been avoiding.

Your place first. East apartment after the audit week, if we still want it then. Leave the inside door open the first night.

Trope sent it.

She went back to work.

CHAPTER 27

The Seeing Cat

Four years after the renewal of the Reciprocal Address and Independent Refusal Act, twenty-two years after an impossible animal had entered her room and left no public evidence, Trope supervised twelve younger shooters in cold rain while a lawful target failed to exist.

The course vehicle crossed the painted threat line with its transponder dark. A rifle-shaped case showed through the rear glass. Three students had firing solutions before Ren, the junior evaluator nearest the maintenance map, lifted two fingers from the wet board.

"There's a municipal hold route," she said. "Flood control can close the service corridor without entering the weapons chain."

Trope shifted against the shoulder harness. She had loosened it that morning, and it still found the tender place. "What gives them authority?"

"Dead transponder, unverified load, culvert access."

"And what ends it?"

"A clean identity return, or the vehicle gets out before the barrier sets."

"Say what you're doing, then."

Ren keyed the municipal channel. The barrier came down across the projected route. The exercise ended with every weapon unfired, and the case in the vehicle proved to contain survey poles.

Trope studied the training board. Her revised diagram had correct timings, correct offices, and a utility vehicle shaped like a wounded table. The two civilians beside it might have been potatoes or water tanks.

"The diagram communicates," she said.

"Under protest," Ren said.

The class laughed, then rebuilt the problem around Ren's route instead of memorizing Trope's answer. They disabled the municipal relay, introduced an access dispute, and added a second refusal point. By the time the range released them, the rain had thickened and Trope's recovery clock had exceeded the standard printed on her review slate.

Their approved return route crossed a decommissioned agricultural district. Trope heard the kittens before anyone saw them.

The cries came from behind a collapsed drainage grate beside Transfer Depot Twelve. Rusted sheet metal sagged over black water. Adult cats watched from pallet stacks and service ducts, their eyes catching the work lamps with ordinary suspicion.

Trope raised one fist. "Course suspended. Keep range safety active, and nobody enters the channel."

Ren was already kneeling beyond the contamination stripe. "The grate has one sound edge. We can brace the roof skin from outside, lift here, and use a carrier panel as a loop."

"Show me the load path."

Ren traced it with one wet glove from the buckled sheet to the concrete lip. "Two people on the intact edge, nobody under the metal."

Rain rattled over the roof skin, soft at first and then hard enough to make it whisper.

"Do it," Trope said. "It's your method. I'll take traffic and perimeter."

They freed three kittens while every human body stayed clear of the roof. One was too cold to object. Another bit a warming pack and would not release it. Trope called municipal animal response, then the independent veterinary service listed for quarantine overflow.

Dr. Ilyra Moss arrived in a white field coat already dark at the shoulders. She examined the smallest kitten before asking who owned the building.

"Warm fluids, heat, parasite isolation, and no communal carrier." She pointed at a dish near the wall. "Which one of you put grain mash in that?"

A student lowered his hand.

"Cats aren't small livestock. Take it away."

Municipal responders found three property records leading to three offices and no funded colony program. Old grain supported rodents. A damaged conduit warmed the service ducts. Two managed colonies had been displaced by nearby construction, and abandoned domestic cats had entered through a hole in the fence large enough for human convenience.

Trope volunteered the course unit for temporary weatherproofing.

"For how long?" Dr. Moss asked.

"Until the responsible office takes over."

"There isn't one."

"Then until someone accepts the work."

Dr. Moss looked at the wet depot, the students, and the kitten breathing unevenly in her hands. "That sentence has founded many bad institutions."

"Give it an end condition."

"Two months. Census, sterilization plan, clean water, disease screening, and a handoff decision. I retain clinical authority."

Trope signed beneath those terms. The depot roster called it Depot Twelve Colony Care. It promised no sanctuary and implied no destiny.

The smallest kitten faltered during transport. Dr. Moss put the warmed fluid line into Trope's hands because the veterinarian was already using both hands and rank did not improve circulation. The kitten weighed less than the rifle bolt Trope had cleaned that morning. It smelled of drainage water and wet grain. When its breathing steadied, Dr. Moss took the line back as ordinary work.

"Don't name it after the rescue," she said.

"I wasn't going to."

"Someone always is."

Ren carried the contaminated blankets toward disposal. "I was considering Culvert."

"No," Dr. Moss and Trope said together.

Two months later, the handoff meeting took place beneath a roof leak that advanced across the table despite three buckets and a municipal tarp.

The census held twenty-seven cats, nine already sterilized and four still under treatment. An elderly black tom slept on Dr. Moss's records case while everyone argued around him.

A neighborhood caretaker brought twelve years of handwritten feeding notes. Her pages contained vanished cats the municipal census called current and current cats no office had counted at all. Asha Drenn, the temporary logistics coordinator, marked each uncertainty instead of cleaning the list for presentation.

Then she pushed a staffing sheet toward Trope.

"You keep volunteering trainees as if trainees are a labor category."

"They are labor."

"They're rotating labor under military scheduling. I can't build a feeding plan out of patriotism and weather."

Trope inspected the figures. "What can you build?"

"Two paid carers, scheduled volunteers, public donation records, and no intake promise."

A maintenance worker shouted from the east bay. An energized conduit had gone under floodwater. Asha broke off in the middle of a sentence, cleared the bay, and reassigned the cats. The old black tom opened one eye as carriers, records, and people moved around her orders. Trope reached her feet after the last carrier crossed the threshold.

The next decisions were mostly refusals.

A feed supplier offered to finish the west roof in exchange for branding and an unlimited-intake promise.

"They're buying intake authority with roofing compound," Asha said.

"They're buying optimism," Trope said.

Dr. Moss folded the proposal. "Optimism doesn't clean ringworm."

The board refused. The roof took three smaller grants, a public contract, and a volunteer crew who discovered the original drain had been installed uphill.

Trope later proposed twenty more resident places. Asha asked whose night staff would care for them. Trope named the years of funding she could guarantee.

"That isn't lifetime care," Asha said. "It's a grant wearing a cat."

The hall stayed closed.

When a neighborhood volunteer showed that Trope's trainees drew the clean shifts while local caretakers inherited litter, medication, and dawn feeding, Asha rewrote the rota before telling her.

"You could've asked me."

"I could have. The schedule was mine."

Trope served two dawn litter shifts. The cats responded to institutional reform by producing the same amount of waste.

The sanctuary's first adoption failed for reasons no policy meeting had anticipated.

A family selected a young gray female who had slept through the interview and bitten nobody during the handling test. The children named her Comet. The carrier left at noon and returned before evening with the

same cat, two crying children, and a father holding a curtain rod in three pieces.

Comet had climbed the curtains, crossed the ceiling rail, opened a cabinet, and remained inside it while the family searched the street. Nobody had been harmed. Everybody had become certain of something different.

The father expected judgment. Asha asked whether they wanted to try again with support or return the adoption. The older child said Comet hated them. Dr. Moss said Comet had known them for six hours and did not possess enough evidence for hatred.

Trope crouched beside the carrier. Comet pressed her body against the far wall and watched every hand.

"Return," the father said. His voice broke on the word. "We wanted to be the kind of family that could do this."

Asha took the carrier without making him defend the sentence. The adoption record said **RETURNED: HOUSEHOLD FIT, UNRESOLVED; NO PENALTY**. The children were allowed to visit the next week. They brought the broken curtain rod because the younger one believed Comet might recognize it.

Comet was adopted four months later by a woman who owned no curtains and preferred a cat that inspected cabinets. The first family returned twice before choosing an elderly pair who regarded climbing as a historical error.

On their second visit the younger child brought the broken curtain rod again. Comet sniffed it through the carrier bars and bit the splintered end. The child took this as recognition. Dr. Moss did not correct him.

Seven folding chairs circled the incorporation table. Dr. Moss took clinical authority and Asha operations. Trope's founder seat carried one vote, no veto, no intake power, no successor choice, and a six-year expiration.

The clerk asked whether she wanted a reserved office.

"No," Asha said before Trope could answer.

"You asked me to build an institution," she told Trope. "Not a room where everyone waits for you to arrive."

"No reserved office," Trope said.

Her field review arrived that year. The body that had carried her through the work no longer met deployment standard. At the small ceremony, Ren cut the first slice through a cake reproduction of Trope's wounded-table diagram.

"You drove the knife through the water tank," Trope said.

"It was a potato."

For three days the empty shoulder harness occupied a chair. Nera sat on the floor beside it without touching. Trope named what she would miss: preparation, competent teams, the quiet before a lawful shot, returning with an unused rifle. On the fourth day she cleaned the harness, returned it, and accepted one quarterly seminar with no standing command.

The depot later came up for public sale. A storage cooperative tried to purchase it without the colony requirement and withdrew when the amendment was denied.

"Commercially impaired," its representative said.

"By cats," Asha replied.

Trope bought the site with disclosed personal funds and conveyed it directly to the trust. The covenant barred residence, resale, inheritance, and shrine conversion.

"Founder memorial wing?" the solicitor asked.

"No."

Asha checked the transfer schedule. "We do need a laundry wing."

"That may survive me."

"Laundry usually does."

By the time the trust could honestly staff seventy-two resident places, twelve quarantine rooms, and twelve emergency stabilization bays, it needed signs, medicine folders, carrier tags, complaint forms, adoption packets, and a public name.

Trope suggested **The Seeing Cat**.

The board asked why.

"Because cats see," she said.

Cats did see. The board waited for more, did not receive it, and approved the name after confirming that no doctrine, claim of visitation, or supernatural service would appear in the mission statement.

The legal name was the Emerald Sanctuary Animal Care Trust. The place itself became The Seeing Cat.

On the first winter night after the sign went up, the heating loop failed in the west resident hall. A valve stem sheared because the replacement alloy was wrong.

Asha woke Trope at 02:13, not for founder authority but because every available body was moving carriers. Trope arrived in old trousers, one boot unlaced, and found thirty-one cats distributed among offices, laundry carts, the volunteer lounge, and a records room that had never expected to contain litter.

Dr. Moss triaged cold-sensitive residents. Asha ran the move. A night carer named Bel Daro crawled into the service trench with the maintenance contractor and discovered the shutoff diagram had been copied from the mirrored wing. Trope held a lamp and kept offering the wrong wrench until Bel told her to stop helping directionally.

Nera arrived with blankets from both apartments. One cat urinated on the sealed covenant copy. Another climbed into the donation drawer and refused extraction while the room cooled around it.

The temporary repair took five hours. Nobody died. Three respiratory cases worsened, one volunteer was bitten, and the west hall smelled of wet wool and fear until morning.

At the review, Trope began to propose a rule requiring duplicate diagrams at every shutoff. Bel interrupted.

"We had two diagrams. They were both wrong."

The review lasted past lunch. Physical trace verification went into the next maintenance walk-through. Night staff received authority to mark a diagram untrusted without waiting for a supervisor. The contractor accepted

the valve cost and disputed the five hours of emergency labor. Asha disputed the dispute.

For weeks afterward, one tortoiseshell slept on the warm cabinet above the new shutoff. Staff called her Valve despite Sumi's objection that the name lacked poetry. The invoice remained open longer than the bite wound. Valve outlived the contractor.

Trope attempted the logo.

She inspected every mark while making it. The animal acquired a narrow body, an implausible head, and arrows labeled WHITE NEAR FOREPAW, SHALLOW NOTCH FAR EAR, EMERALD IRISES, LOW TAIL, and KEEP IT NARROW. Asha laughed first. Dr. Moss laughed until the quarantine slate slipped from her hand.

"The anatomy is not clinically actionable," Dr. Moss said.

"The features are correct."

"It has four elbows."

"Those are directional indicators."

The board hired Sumi Venn, an independent artist and identity designer.

Trope supplied the semantic brief: a small narrow cat in three-quarter seated profile facing left, dust-gray-brown coat, near forepaw white, far ear shallowly notched, emerald irises without glow, tail low around the feet. No halo, weapon, Oracle, Deer, Crown seal, cinnamon light, or Trope Silhouette.

Sumi tapped the page. "You've described a police identification request."

"I've described a cat."

"You've described evidence that a cat occurred."

The first revision was round, plush, and conventionally adorable.

"That cat has never missed a meal," Trope said.

"It's a public mark, not a hunger record."

"We do hospice."

Sumi removed the roundness.

The second revision had the right body and luminous eyes. Its posture enthroned the animal.

"No," Trope said.

"The eyes?"

"The authority."

Sumi dimmed the green to ordinary iris color.

The third revision crouched too alertly, the notched ear and forward gaze turning witness into surveillance.

"It is hunting the viewer," Trope said.

"Maybe the viewer deserves supervision."

"The complaint form shouldn't threaten retaliation."

In the final mark, Sumi brought the tail low around the feet but left a small opening between tail and body. The silhouette did not close into a seal. The cat rested, uncaptured.

Trope traced the printed edge with one fingertip. The image vanished from her mind when she looked away. She could compare it only to

semantic facts, spatial relations, remembered pressure, and what the drawing falsely implied.

"You left it open," she said.

"A sanctuary should not look like it owns its own animal."

"That was not in the brief."

"No. It is in the art."

Trope approved the mark. The design record preserved Sumi's name.

Nera studied the final board after the others left. "Your invented animals usually stop being stable after the second feature."

"This one had a checklist."

"You rejected the glowing eyes before Sumi finished explaining them."

"They were making a claim."

"And the hunting posture?"

"Wrong relation."

Nera studied Trope rather than the cat. Their long life together gave her access, not ownership.

Trope kept looking at the printed cat. "It just came to me."

Nera considered this. "Sumi's open line is better than your arrows."

"Most things are."

The Seeing Cat opened while a calico screamed at a latched carrier and an orange kitten escaped long enough to climb Asha's trouser leg. Dr. Moss signed the clinical rooms ready. Asha held the staff, safety, schedule, and admission slate. Trope wore a clean shirt and belonged to neither chain.

A news crew asked to move the ribbon ceremony fifteen minutes earlier. Asha refused because quarantine handoff still blocked the entrance corridor. The crew left with footage of volunteers rolling litter bins beneath the new sign. The sanctuary began on the care schedule rather than the broadcast schedule.

A family arrived during the ceremony with a dehydrated stray found under a freight platform. Routine intake was full.

"We have emergency space," Trope said.

"For forty-eight hours," Asha replied. "Stabilization only, with a receiving plan."

Dr. Moss could treat the cat but promise no residence. The family found a municipal foster route for the following afternoon. Asha authorized the bay.

Mina tore the blank back from the ceremony program and asked where the family had parked, whether the youngest child could manage stairs, and how long the cat tolerated a carrier. She drew the route as turns, lift failures, platform noises, and places to stop for water. The south lift had failed after the public transit feed was printed; Mina crossed it out and moved the route through a freight elevator whose door had to be held for three seconds before it accepted a passenger request.

"You remember all that?" Trope asked.

"I can picture it," Mina said. She turned the paper toward the family. "They can't use my picture."

The father folded the map into the carrier pocket.

They completed the placement while Trope stood beside the ribbon with nothing useful to authorize.

Della and Tomas attended through a public screen because travel had become too costly to their bodies. The connection froze with Tomas's mouth open during Asha's capacity explanation and recovered in time for Della to say that seventy-two cats sounded like an invasion with bookkeeping.

Mina found Trope's original sketch in the design display and asked why the animal possessed artillery range arrows.

Trope studied the old range arrows. "Artistic context."

Sumi, standing nearby, said, "Failed authorship."

The plaque credited Sumi.

Trope's opening remarks thanked the people who had rescued, counted, treated, transported, cleaned, complained, corrected, repaired, donated, refused, and stayed awake.

"We will care for as many cats as our staff, space, medicine, and welfare standards can honestly support," she said. "When we reach that limit, we will say no rather than call overcrowding compassion."

The calico screamed again. The audience laughed, and the animal objected for reasons entirely its own.

That evening, friends gathered at the Quench beneath an old training diagram whose arrows were more legible than its people. Food crowded the table. Mills retold the logo story with Sumi still its author. Tavi said Trope's unbidden concepts usually consisted of one label, two arrows, and a civilian shaped like a root vegetable.

"Water tank," Trope said.

"Potato," Ren called from the next table without looking over.

Arlen lifted his glass. "I'm just saying, an actual Seeing Cat showing up where nobody would know but you would fit the Trope."

The table went still for one beat. Arlen drank instead of asking.

Mills laughed at the evidence, Nera at Arlen's confidence, and Tavi at the callsign's appetite. Trope laughed hardest, bent over the table by affection that had reached the boundary and stopped there.

No one asked again.

Trope raised her glass. "To the cat."

They answered.

Across the district, night staff observed intake limits, medication records, quarantine checks, feeding schedules, and clinical orders while Trope sat over late food at the Quench. Sumi's open-tailed cat watched nothing from the carrier tags. The living cats scratched, slept, hid, ate, complained, watched, and purred from ordinary bodies.

EPILOGUE

Thirty years after The Seeing Cat opened, Trope reported for her scheduled south-sunroom shift before the morning feeding carts.

The outer doors recognized neither founders nor legends. She presented her wrist tag. The reader flashed green, and she pushed through with her cane ahead of the door's patient mechanical complaint. She was somewhere near ninety. Public records had catalogued campaigns, appointments, hearings, and one badly photographed retirement cake with greater care than the birth date she had never volunteered.

New lettering crossed the adoption desk glass.

WALK-IN HOURS RESTORED

ASSISTED FORMS AVAILABLE

PRIOR DENIALS UNDER REVIEW

At the desk, a gray-haired applicant dictated an address while a volunteer keyed it. Two people waited with paper forms. A third used the network terminal. Nobody was sent away for arriving through the wrong channel.

The online-first system had lasted seven months. It shortened queues for people with reliable access and quietly excluded those who needed old equipment, explanation, or a person beside the form. Staff caught the pattern; applicants supplied the names. Dr. Pela Noss and operations director Iven Rook suspended the rule, reopened denials, and published an apology before Trope knew enough to form a useful opinion.

Iven emerged from Intake with a slate under one arm and a carrier in the other. "South sunroom, one hour. No lifting. Kettle's fluids changed yesterday, so report appetite changes to Lio."

"I know how a rota works."

"You founded a place where I'm required to say things you know."

"That was poor planning."

"It was excellent planning."

He went to Quarantine before agreement arrived.

Trope's founder seat had expired twenty-four years earlier. Her old credential opened no private door. Dr. Noss controlled care; Iven controlled staff and ordinary operations. The trust owned the buildings, the covenant bound the land, and affection remained absent from the maintenance budget.

The south sunroom contained washable chairs, heated cushions, food bins, two archive carts, an enrichment panel, and filtered morning light spread across the floor. Cats occupied the warm places with the legal confidence of creatures who had never signed the covenant.

Nera sat at the archive table with a magnifier clipped to her lenses and three versions of the same correction open before her. She was also very old, though she treated this as a lighting problem rather than a moral achievement. They had never married or merged their homes. A short

accessible passage joined the apartments, with a door at either end. Some mornings both stood open. Some evenings one clicked shut. Neither woman kept the other's key.

Nera tapped a sentence. "This curator says the access complaints 'revealed the sanctuary's enduring commitment to inclusion.'"

"They revealed that the appointment system was bad."

"I have suggested that wording."

"You removed enduring?"

"I am considering removing commitment."

"Violent."

"The dates are also wrong."

"Kill those first."

Kettle presided from the heated cushion beside Trope's chair. He was sixteen, orange, amber-eyed, arthritic, chronically renal-impaired, and offended by any delay between noticing him and arranging one's body for his convenience. Trope wedged the cane against her knee and extended the back of her left wrist.

Kettle inspected it. Then he leaned one shoulder against her and looked away, as though the contact had happened accidentally and discussion would spoil it.

Across the room, Lio Fen reconciled care notes with the feed list. At twenty-three, he had the grave concentration of an apprentice trusted with real consequences and the hair of someone who had removed a scrub cap too quickly. Sela Rin, twenty, catalogued beside him beneath a landslide of design proofs. She wore a supervised-care tab beside her public-history badge and had written three indexing codes on her forearm.

"You embedded a medical note in the design box," Sela said.

"Kettle sat on the design box."

"That doesn't change its provenance."

"It changed its location."

"You're the reason archives need custody records."

"I'm the reason Kettle received breakfast."

Kettle's ears moved at the word.

Lio found Trope's eyes closed against the bright edge of the window. "Is she asleep?"

Nera kept reading. "She's off shift if she is."

Trope declined to settle it.

Sela softened her voice anyway. "Listen to this. Original semantic brief: narrow body, dust-gray-brown coat, white near forepaw, shallow notch in the far ear, emerald irises without glow, low tail."

"I have seen the mark."

"This isn't a normal logo brief."

"You're an intern. You've seen six logo briefs."

"Seven. The grain cooperative repeated 'reassuring abundance' four times."

"Then Trope's is better."

"It reads like a witness description pretending to be design guidance."

Lio set down the feed slate. "Witness to what?"

Sela held up one of Sumi's early proofs. "That is the question."

The public mark showed a seated cat with one white paw, one notched ear, ordinary green eyes, and a low tail that did not quite close around the body. Sumi's open line belonged to Sumi. It was publicly credited and copied across medicine folders, complaint forms, carrier tags, and the sign outside.

Sela opened Arlen's oral-history transcript. "At the opening, he says, 'An actual Seeing Cat showing up where nobody would know but Trope would fit the Trope.'"

"He also says it was a joke," Lio replied.

"Three lines later."

"Those lines are why history has lines."

"I know." Sela flattened the page. "I'm not claiming it happened."

"You're arranging your face as if you wish it had."

"My face isn't in the finding."

"Your face is conducting independent research."

Sela threw a cloth tab at him. It fell short.

Kettle began to purr against Trope's wrist. The vibration was small and uneven, confined to an old cat's body, the cushion, and the local acoustics of the chair. It traveled through skin and tendon into the aching joints of her hand. Years ago, another purr had entered the station's deeper structure. Kettle's stayed here.

Sela returned to the transcript. "The popular story isn't unreasonable. Trope has no mental pictures. No face, room, or animal returns after sight ends. Then she gives Sumi a description this exact, names the place The Seeing Cat, and toasts 'To the cat' at the opening."

"People toast cats at cat sanctuaries."

"People don't usually make Arlen Vos stop joking for half a second."

Lio considered that. "No one in the oral history says one came."

"No. The story says she hoped one might." Sela turned the proof until the open tail-line caught the light. "She made a place gentle enough that it could approach if it wanted. Low enclosures, open hands, no trap disguised as welcome. A room in the world where she wouldn't have to remember an image because the thing itself would be there."

Lio compared the sleeping woman with the purring cat. "That sounds sad."

"It's sad."

"I thought you liked it."

"I do." Sela's voice softened. "She spent her life refusing to force an answer, so she built one place where the answer could come freely. It never did, but all the ordinary cats got the place anyway."

Lio touched Kettle's appetite entry with one finger. "Say that part first."

"I'm trying to understand why people build things."

"People build things for six reasons and tell one story afterward."

"Seven reasons."

"Name them."

"Grief, vanity, money, guilt, love, fear, and tax treatment."

"You forgot wet kittens."

"Things can begin twice."

Trope held the laughter behind her teeth.

Behind her lids, no dust-colored fur or green eyes formed. Nothing returned as a picture. She retained the rough coat beneath her fingers, the small forehead pressing into her palm, the white paw on her boot, the claw caught in her cuff, the warmth, the modest weight, and a purr passing through the room and into her bones.

Beyond the sunroom, a feeding cart squeaked past Quarantine. The sanctuary had grown from wet kittens, Ren's rescue geometry, Dr. Moss's medicine, Asha's administration, Sumi's art, municipal records, night staff, complaint routes, and thirty years of work its founders had never imagined. Kettle pressed his old shoulder into Trope's wrist.

Eyes closed, Trope felt Kettle purr against her wrist, old and ordinary and warm. She let the laughter come quietly, where it disturbed no one.

She had already seen one.